PARRAMATTA GIRLS
by Alana Valentine

Teacher’s Notes
Written by Saskia Smith
Education at Riverside

Education is at the heart of our program at Riverside through the productions we create in house and the whole body of work we offer to students and teachers.

Our 2014 Secondary Program is bursting with exciting and inspiring ways to connect professional theatre-making with the English, Drama and Theatre studies curriculum's to provide an enjoyable way for students to gain real support for those key study areas.

But theatre should also inspire a love of live performance, spark imagination and creativity and enable young people living in today’s complex society, to feel confident to express themselves, to feel empathy with other people and to develop key life skills. At Riverside we believe the beauty of live theatre is that it allows us to discover our place in society. Why? Because all the world’s a stage.

About our Teacher’s Notes

These notes suggest practical activities to enhance student learning in the HSC Verbatim Theatre topic area. They also provide students with reflections on professional practice surrounding creating verbatim theatre.

The notes are designed to accompany the production of Parramatta Girls staged at Riverside Theatres, Parramatta, 2014. They have been written by Saskia Smith and compiled by Amy Matthews.

Acknowledgement of Country

Riverside would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land we sit on, and the land where Parramatta Girls is set, the Darug People of the Burramattagal Clan.
Parramatta Girls
By Alana Valentine
Directed by Tanya Goldberg

CAST

CORAL  Christine Anu
MAREE  Holly Austin
JUDI  Annie Byron
LYNETTE  Vanessa Downing
MELANIE  Anni Finsterer
KERRY  Sharni McDermott
MARLENE  Tessa Rose

CREATIVE TEAM

Set and Costume Design  Tobhiyah Stone Feller
Lighting Design  Verity Hampson
Sound Design  Jeremy Silver
Producer  Camilla Rountree
Fight Choreography  Scott Witt
Choral Tuition  Christine Douglas
Education Coordinator  Amy Matthews

This production premiered in the Lennox Theatre, at the Riverside Theatres Parramatta on 1 May 2014.
SECTION 1:
THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT
The site of the Parramatta Girls’ Home has been used as various penal institutions since 1821. Established as a Female Factory in convict times (1821 - 1847), it then became an Invalid and Lunatic asylum (1847). Children were housed in the Roman Catholic Orphanage (1844 - 1886) before it became the Parramatta Girls’ Home (1887 - 1974). After the Girls’ Home was closed, it became the Kamballa and Taldree Childrens’ Centre (1974 - 1986) then most recently the Norma Parker Detention Centre (1986 - 2008).

Girls could be sent to the Parramatta Girls’ Home (later named the Girls’ Training School in 1947) for being ‘at risk of moral danger’. Magistrates or welfare officers could rule them as ‘uncontrollable’. Some girls were sent there as they were orphaned, others because their parents had divorced. Some inmates had been abused, neglected or abandoned, yet they were sent to the GTS as punishment.

It has since emerged - and has continued to emerge through the current Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Abuse - that girls in the home were subjected to appalling conditions. Abuse, beatings, enforced sedation and solitary confinement were just some of the harrowing experiences the inmates of this home suffered. Being ‘sent to Parramatta’ was a threat that terrified generations of young girls.

**ACTIVITY - INTERNET RESEARCH (SMALL GROUPS)**

The ‘Memory Project’ website provides an excellent history of the precinct where the Parramatta Girls’ Home was located.

http://www.pffpmemoryproject.org/history.php

The site of the former home still exists, and is in the process of being transformed;
In an exciting new approach to social history and contemporary art practice, the PFFP Memory Project brings together artists, historians, academics and former occupants with the aim of activating this historic precinct as a cultural heritage centre and an internationally recognized Site of Conscience.

1. Do you know where the site of the Girls’ Home is? What do you imagine it looks like? You need to do some internet research now (and the character of Kerry from Parramatta Girls will also be a good resource). Find out the following (one topic per small group):

- Who was in charge of the home (government body, the church, etc)? Did this change over time, with the different uses of the home?
- what is the closest kind of institution still operating today?
- gather some photographic references of the home and similar institutions
- why did the home keep getting closed and having its name changed?
- why did former PM Kevin Rudd apologise to the Forgotten Australians?

ACTIVITY - TIMELINE

Using the following websites as a resource, construct a TIMELINE of the history of the Parramatta Girls Training School.

http://www.pffpmemoryproject.org/history.php


CURRENT CONTEXT
Currently (as at April 2014), a Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sex Abuse is occurring.

The Royal Commission holds formal public hearings to hear evidence about child sexual abuse within institutions.

Child abuse within institutions is a devastating reality. The Commission has been established as it is the highest legal body existing, that can not only air and scrutinise cases of abuse, but can also MAKE RECOMMENDATIONS to ensure abuse NEVER happens within institutions.

WEB RESOURCE
This links you to the Commission’s page regarding its aims (terms of reference). It is well worth a read.


ACTIVITY - COMPREHENSION, COMPOSITION, CONTEXT

Read the following articles (perhaps aloud, in class), then discuss or answer the questions posed;


- Why do you think complaints were not made at the time of the abuse occurring?
- What is a statute of limitations, as referred to in the article?
- “...Often there was the use of pharmaceuticals to control the girls' behaviour...” Research one drug that was used in the GTS and its side effects.
- Why wouldn’t Sharyn tell her story until now?
- What sort of punishment do you think the department of child welfare guards who raped and abused the girls deserve? Why?
- Some of the former inmates went on to take drugs or be prostitutes. What do you think some of the perpetrators of the abuse went on to do with their lives?


- Do you think the victims of abuse could have paid for the same number of lawyers as the church? Why/why not? What measures could be put in place to make this more equitable?
- Cardinal Pell says he would prefer victims not to deal with the complaints via litigation. What other means might they have?
- Based on your overall reading of the article, what is your impression of Cardinal Pell in view of this matter?
- Do you think the Royal Commission is making a positive impact?


- How would you feel if your teachers addressed you solely by your student number, NEVER your name?
- List three things that strike you about the picture of the ‘isolation unit’
- Where is Hay? Locate it on a map. Why was this location chose for the more extreme punishment of the girls, do you think?
- What would be adequate compensation for the victims of abuse at the GTS, in your view?
- Names of some of the perpetrators appear in this article...

ACTIVITY - SCRIPT WRITING

Write a short scene between an alleged perpetrator and a member of their family, such as their wife, or son, or mother. This family member has JUST READ the same article you just read, above.
This is the first time they have discovered their beloved has been named as an alleged perpetrator in this case. What do these two characters say to one another? Where does the scene take place? How does it start? What is the most climactic moment of the scene? How does the scene conclude? Remember this is just one episode, the revelation. This could be part of a longer play.

**ACTIVITY - CREATIVE WRITING**

Imagine you are a former inmate of the Parramatta Girls’ Training School. What would you want to say, in your message to Australia?

*If you have attended a private session, we invite you to send your own ‘Message to Australia’. The ‘Message to Australia’ is an opportunity for the people who have bravely told their stories to the Royal Commission to send a short message to the Australian community about their experience and their hopes for creating a safer environment for children in the future. At the end of the Royal Commission, these messages will be published in a book and kept at the National Library of Australia, where it will be available to members of the public and preserved for future generations.*

*From 2014, all people who attend a private session will be given a thank you pack which includes a slip for you to write your ‘Message to Australia’. If you attended a private session in 2013 and would like to receive this pack and provide your ‘Message to Australia’, please call the Royal Commission on 1800 099 340.*


- Have a look at these facts, taken from the Royal Commission website;

  *Our fast facts*
  
  *correct as of March 2014*
  
  11,453
  
  Calls handled
  
  4,459
Letters & emails received
1,459
Private sessions held
528
Notices to produce issued

- What is a ‘Private Session’?
- What is a ‘Notice to Produce’?
- What strikes you about the number of calls and letters received?

ACTIVITY - STAGE ACTION

Below are a series of activities to explore and discover this Royal Commission, in view of the context it provides to the production of Parramatta Girls.

My full name is Leanne* and I am 59 years old.

I receive a disability pension. I grew up in Balgowlah with my mother and father, two brothers and a young sister. I was the eldest child. I went to primary school in Manly. I went to High School in Manly Vale. I left school at 15 years old and started working at a dry cleaners.

Admission to Parramatta Girls Training School
In 1970, I was sent to Parramatta Girls because I had breached an 18-month good behaviour bond.

Q. Can I just stop you there. Can you tell the Commission how you came to be on an 18-month good behaviour bond?

A. Yes. I had run away from home and been picked up by the police and taken to Glebe Shelter and been charged with being exposed to moral danger and uncontrollable, because I had run away from home. I spent some time at Glebe and then at Minda. Then I was put on an 18-month good behaviour bond. I went back home to my parents, but because I was the oldest child - both of my parents worked. I had three siblings, one of them a baby. I didn’t have any friends. I wasn’t allowed to socialise, go to a movie, have a life. I basically just had to look after the younger ones. My
parents were very strict, severe. My father was 22 years older than my mother, and they were older parents. I didn't understand at the time why they were so strict and severe, but I did come to understand later that my mother had been sexually abused as a child, and it was her way of keeping me off the streets, so to speak. Very strict, and I wasn't allowed to go anywhere or do anything. I ran away from home again. After that situation of running away from home and being picked up, I was taken to the Glebe Shelter again and then to court. I had run away with another girl. My girlfriend's parents had engaged a solicitor and so she was sent home with her parents, but I was sentenced to six months to two years in Parramatta Girls Home. I was charged with being uncontrollable and exposed to moral danger again and breaking my 18-month good behaviour bond.

Q. When it says at the end of paragraph 5 of your statement, "They said I was 'uncontrollable'", was that your parents --

A. No.

Q. Or the court?

A. The court and the welfare officer.

Q. Did your parents attend the court hearing?

A. My mother did, yes.

Q. Was she asked what her view was?

A. She said she wanted me to come home. The court overruled that and said that some time in an institution would do me good. On the trip to Parramatta Girls Home by two police officers, I tried to jump out of the car into traffic. I was almost successful, but one of them grabbed me. They were very upset at me and very angry, but I just didn't want to be put into an institution. I've left a little bit out, because my parents appealed, and I spent two months waiting in Minda for the appeal,
which was denied. In that time, I had my four front teeth broken by a female officer. So that sort of was the lead-up to then being taken to Parramatta Girls

*Name has been changed.*

Divide into pairs. Use the transcript above as a script for two actors. Set up your stage space with the chairs, desks and other furniture you feel might be appropriate. Stage your scene, and perform it for your class.

**ACTIVITY - GROUP DISCUSSION**

*“Any nation that does not protect its children does not deserve to be called a nation” Nelson Mandela*

In reference to the transcript still, list the reasons Leanne was incarcerated in the Girls’ Home.

Were these reasons just and fair? Are their instances in your own life which, were this the 1960s, you might have ended up in the Home?

Separate into groups. Put forward a child protection law you think should be in place, or one you know already exists. Why is your suggested law necessary? There are an estimated 500,000 ‘forgotten Australians’ who were placed in institutionalised care. Would your law work to the benefit of every single one? Cite instances in the play *Parramatta Girls* when child protection laws were harmful to the child.

The 2004 Inquiry of the Senate Community Affairs References Committee estimated that more than 500,000 children have experienced life in an orphanage, Home or other form of out-of-home care during the last century in Australia.

The reasons children were placed in institutional care varied. Some were removed from their parents and made State Wards and/or placed in State care, because:

- The State considered their parents unfit or the children at risk.
- Some had parents who were dead, in prison, missing or otherwise unable to care for them.
- Others were placed by their parent/s because the parent/s could not provide for them.
- Sometimes these parents had to work and used the Home as a form of child care. If they could, they paid maintenance to those running the institution. Many children were in Homes simply by reason of poverty, in an era of almost no community or government support for families in crisis or need; many children had fathers and mothers who returned traumatised from war service.
- Some children were placed in institutions simply because their parents had separated or divorced.

The Forgotten Australians include child migrants and Indigenous children, many of whom were removed because of their race.


**ACTIVITY - DEBATE**

Here are two topics of debate. You may find being in the affirmative team or negative team very challenging when forming an argument, as your own opinion may differ greatly. After the debate you may need time to debrief as a class so you can share personal thoughts that arose from staging this exercise.

**DEBATE 1: THE GIRLS DESERVED THEIR TREATMENT**

**DEBATE 2: THE GUARDS/STAFF SHOULD BE PUNISHED FOR THEIR HARSH TREATMENT OF THE GIRLS**

Cite evidence from the play *Parramatta Girls* to support your argument, as well as your own background knowledge of the Parramatta Girls’ Training Home.
ACTIVITY - CREATIVE WRITING, PERSONAL AND IMAGINED PERSPECTIVES

Using Alana Valentine’s script *Parramatta Girls*, cite TEN the references the characters make to the physical environment of the Parramatta Girls Training home: its smell, atmosphere, rituals etc. Make a sketch of where the girls sleep. Now, find an image of the dormitory of the GTS from the internet. Compare/contrast this sleeping environment with YOUR OWN room.

Write an account of your day as an inmate of the home. You can assume one of the characters from the play or invent your own.

APOLOGY TO THE FORGOTTEN AUSTRALIANS - DEALING WITH ‘AN UGLY CHAPTER IN OUR NATION’S HISTORY’

Have a look at this video;


Former Prime Minister of Australia, Kevin Rudd, apologised to the ‘Forgotten Australians’ on November 16 2009. The apology was intended as way of giving those people who had been abused while in the care of the state (or other institutions) a voice, having lost their own - having been forgotten. By acknowledging the pain caused to these people as children the healing process can begin in earnest. Mr Rudd directed his apology at these almost 500,000 victims of abuse, neglect and other trauma they were subjected to as children. The apology also acknowledged the complex issues affecting the lives of these half million people due to their experiences, issues such as mental illness, suicide, and drug use. The apology was tabled in Parliament, and received heartfelt responses from some Forgotten Australians themselves, as well as politicians from various constituencies and parties.
Alana Valentine wrote the play in 2008. It premiered at Company B Belvoir, in Sydney. Alana has won numerous awards for her work. You can find out more about her on her website.

http://www.alanavalentine.com/bio

Further, here are some valuable video links:

http://vimeo.com/42098666
http://vimeo.com/42094676

**NOTES FROM ALANA VALENTINE**

Below is an EXCELLENT briefing from Alana Valentine. It was prepared for the original production in 2007, as you will note when you read the final question in particular.

Dramatised from the real life stories of ex-inmates of the Girls Training School (GTS), Parramatta, Alana Valentine’s history-making play exposes in moving detail the experience of young Australian women at this notorious inner-west punitive institution. Operating since 1887 as a home for abandoned, at risk, and 'criminal' girls under the age of 18, it was renamed GTS in 1947 and did not close until 1974. During those years, interviewees have told stories of thousands of women being brutalised, drugged, and confined in solitary for more than a week at a time. It is a sobering, compelling and frequently harrowing tale. Yet the pain and grief that these women speak of is more than swamped by the intensity of the love and trust and support that they offer each other. Suffering is not dwelt on, rather humour and tenderness and astonishing courage radiates from the characters on stage. Most incredibly, this is a story of indigenous and non-indigenous women coming together in strength and pride to tell their common story, their common history of Australia’s incarceration of 'uncontrollable' girls. Burning with the fury of those who have never been believed, aching with the comedy of those who have survived the worst that life can throw at them, this will be a night that goes to the heart and soul of being alive, in the tradition of theatre that Company B does best.
Are the character’s all real? What kind of process did you go through with the women?
The stories are all real. The characters are composites of the many women I have interviewed.
There are only eight characters on stage but I have spoken to more than 35 ex-Parramatta Girls
home inmates. I interviewed them and we have had two public readings. The first reading was
pure verbatim, the second was what I would call 'massaged' verbatim and the rehearsal draft is a
fully fledged drama with some storytelling aspects. I think that this process has got the women
used to the idea that it will not directly be their stories, individually, but rather an attempt to show
the bigger picture of both the experience and effects of the home.

Is the reunion a real event? Were you there with the women?
November 2, 2003. Yes, I was invited there by Coral, one of the reunion organisers. I did informal
interviews with many, many women in the courtyard as we were waiting to go in, taking names
and information and followed up a lot of the contacts I made. I also left leaflets about the project
and women who were there rang me and we arranged individual interviews.

Can you give me a potted history of the Parra Girls Home? eg, when did it open and close, who ran
it, what was its function, any interesting facts about it...

1796 Female Factory
1841 Government orphanage.
1844 Catholic orphanage.
1887 Girls Industrial School.
1912 Girls Training Home.
1923 Parramatta Girls Home.
1946 Girls Training School, Parramatta.
1980 Norma Parker Detention Centre for Women, to the present day.

It is also interesting to note that although there were several government enquiries (often
provoked by riots inside the institution) and successive calls for it’s closure nothing was done until
1974 and even then it continued to be used as a place of punitive justice for women. Between
1956 and 1966, 2160 girls, an average of 23 per month, were placed in isolated detention.
This figure peaked in 1959 where 53 girls were recorded in isolated detention in November of that year. The isolated detention of children was, and remains, entirely illegal under the UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child.

What, for you, is the importance of the story? What's the strongest idea or connection for you?
All these women, indigenous and non-indigenous, are bound together by the rawness of the pain they have experienced. As a result, the intensity of the love and trust and support they give each other is incredible. The most important thing for me is the sense they have of speaking for those who didn't make it, for those who didn't survive and the humour, love and commitment they bring to telling their story. All of them, without exception, talk about the stigma of being branded a 'Parramatta Girl' and the fact that they have, for many years, never spoken about it, both out of shame and fear that they won't be believed.

I'm really trying to get a sense of what sort of an event this play is--the way it relates to real events, and the way in which it itself is part of the story of these women's lives, if at all...
This play is part of their truth-telling, self-forgiveness, self-understanding, fight for justice and recognition.

When did you first hear about the Girls Training School and please tell us what type of institution it was?
I first heard about it during a broadcast on Stateline (ABC TV) in May 2003. The Girls Training School Parramatta was a place where both 'delinquent' girls were committed for 'correction' of their uncontrollable behaviour. Many girls were charged with being 'neglected' by their parents or 'exposed to moral danger'. It is sobering to note that this EMD section of the child welfare act was almost never used against boys and that, even though the age of consent was 16, girls could still be charged with being exposed to moral danger up to the age of 18. It is also interesting to note that historians, studying the practices of the juvenile justice and it's nexus with the provision of child welfare, note that punishable delinquency is concentrated in identifiable sections of the Australian population, most particularly girls from Aboriginal communities and housing commission estates. In other words, those who are black and/or poor.
Did it immediately strike you as good material for a play?

It immediately struck me as the voices of people who had not been heard on the Australian mainstage. It immediately struck me that surviving such an institution must involve an incredible story of triumph and courage. These were women with guts, attitude and humour and they were crying out to have their story heard. Both my mother and my grandmother have passed away and I think I just wanted to hang out for a few years with some feisty, tough and bloody funny older women.

What went into researching Parramatta Girls?

Four years of research - speaking to over 35 women - either briefly at the Nov 2 reunion, or subsequently in taped interviews or phone calls. Attendance at the 2004 Senate enquiry hearings 'Forgotten Australians' and general research about 'children in care'. Two rehearsed readings at Belvoir Street theatre as part of their 'Winter Playreadings' sessions. And the need to reach right down inside myself and confront all those demons that plague us all, not just as women, but as humans - the times when I've given in to pettiness, malice, self-interest, despair and also the times when I've been saved by kindness, generosity, friendship and a spirit of community.

Can you describe your approach to the narrative and some of the processes involved in creating the text?

The play has involved the transformation of verbatim testimony into dramatized, character driven conflict and narrative story. Mostly I've just listened and listened and listened until I could boil it all down into an entertaining, moving and shameful portrait of the lives of poor, black and 'delinquent' Australian children in the second half of the 20th Century and the adults that they became.

How did you settle upon the eight characters and the dramatic context for the play?

During the two public readings it became clear that it would be better to follow the lives of a smaller number of characters and for me to 'collapse' the stories of many women into eight distinct characters. I also wanted to set the play at the reunion so that as a dramatist I could concentrate not just on the horrors of their childhood but the resilience of the women in their later years and the legacy of their institutionalization on them, even at an older age - the ways in
which they had carried their experience and been shaped by it. This is eight powerful, stroppy, funny women on stage triumphing over the horror that it thrown at them and laughing, crying and celebrating as they do.

**What are its themes and how are they relevant today?**

It's theme is that life is full of appalling injustices and no-one escapes. It looks at how you don't ever really get over it. The hope that it offers is in the ability to speak honestly about it with others who have been through it too and to put that on a public stage and dare people not to turn away. It's theme is that the incarceration of children in Australia has a long and sobering history. That Australia is not the lucky country if you are poor, black or a young 'uncontrollable' girl.

The Senate report (August 2004) estimates that some half a million Australians experienced some kind of institutionalized 'care' in the last century.

**What involvement have you had in the production?**

I have just finished the first week of rehearsals in which I worked with the actors cutting and refining the text. Wesley Enoch, the director, has consulted me about casting, music, the set, the costumes and other aspects of the production. Obviously, in the end those production decisions are his but he is a great collaborator and an inspirational artist to work with.
SECTION 2:

THE STYLE OF THE PLAY
VERBATIM THEATRE

VERBATIM THEATRE - WHAT IS IT?

‘Verbatim theatre, as Will Hammond and Dan Steward point out in their excellent book on the subject, is not a form but a technique: a way of incorporating the words of real people, as spoken in private interview or public record, into drama. What is astonishing is how ubiquitous it has become.’

http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/may/08/michael-billington-verbatim-theatre

‘It is widely accepted that Derek Paget first coined the term ‘verbatim theatre’ in an article entitled: ‘Verbatim Theatre’: Oral History and Documentary Techniques’ published in the New Theatre Quarterly journal in 1987. In this article Paget defines verbatim theatre as:

“A form of theatre firmly predicated upon the taping and subsequent transcription of interviews with ‘ordinary’ people, done in the context of research into a particular region, subject area, issue, event, or combination of these things. The primary source is then transformed into a text which is acted, usually by the performers who collected the material in the first place.” (Paget 1987: 317).’

http://www.ista.co.uk/downloads/ExploringverbatimtheatrebyAmandaStuartFish.pdf

‘This process is often used to share a specific story or event. So its ideal for exploring cross-curricular topics.

Verbatim Theatre gives voice to people who would not normally have a platform.

The process creates dialogue in a way that most playwrights have to manufacture otherwise. The subjects speak naturally, so their dialogue includes all the ums, pauses, slang, regionalisms, repeated words, and other speech mannerisms that happen in conversation.

Finally it is a tool to study the physicality of a specific person or group of people. How do you imitate the gestures, physical stance, and expressions of someone else?

Verbatim Theatre is a great way for students to work on creating a physical character and to hear/analyse natural dialogue.’
“Verbatim is one of the most malleable, diverse and surprising forms of contemporary theatre.” - Alana Valentine

“It [Parramatta Girls original production at Company B Belvoir] adopts some of the techniques of verbatim theatre but gains momentum to become a well-shaped and potently told drama... On opening night, when former inmates joined the actors on stage for the curtain call, there were tears, smiles and slightly embarrassed bows; an extraordinary moment of life and art blurring and uniting as one.” - Bryce Hallett, Sydney Morning Herald

“Dialogue is selected for its potency and relevance to furthering the play’s narrative. It is layered rather than chronological in its treatment.

There is little collaborative stage action. Often actors sit on stage or speak directly to the audience, but they may react to each other and work together to create motifs in the space.” – Teachers’ Notes, DET, 2009

ACTIVITY - CREATE YOUR OWN DEFINITION

Synthesise the above descriptions of verbatim theatre to create your own. Why do you think verbatim theatre has become so ‘ubiquitous’ (ubiquitous means widespread/found everywhere)?

ACTIVITY - DEBATE

DEBATE 1: VERBATIM THEATRE IS OBJECTIVE AND PRESENTS A BALANCED POINT OF VIEW

DEBATE 2: VERBATIM THEATRE IS MORE POWERFUL THAN TRADITIONAL DRAMA

Cite quotes from Parramatta Girls and other Verbatim Theatre plays you have studied, as well as your background knowledge of the subjects of the plays, to support your argument.
ACTIVITY - PLAY-BUILDING

Divide into small groups.

Find material to write your own verbatim theatre piece. Your piece should be 4 - 6 minutes in length. You are going to perform your pieces for each other in class. You will need sufficient time to gather your material, collate/edit it, rehearse it and perform it.

Make use of your knowledge of the elements of drama when you are creating your piece.

SOURCE MATERIAL

The TV show interview transcripts below could form a jumping off-point for a verbatim scene:

http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2009/s2741361.htm

http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2009/s2744455.htm

Alternatively, you could collect interview material in class, surrounding a topic important to you and your peers. For example, cyber-bullying, eating disorders, the school’s basketball team - whatever you find matters to you as a group.

The process outlined below on the next page will guide/streamline the steps you need to take to create your piece;
THE VERBATIM THEATRE PROCESS

**Interpret**
- Assign the job of dramaturge
- Work with the dramaturge to shape the interviews/information into a narrative and put together your script - write your dialogue

**Imagine**
- How are you going to turn your information into theatre?
- How can you use the elements of drama and production?
- Work together to edit your script

**Invite**
- The director casts the actors in roles
- The director stages a production of the piece to an audience

**Idea**
- Choose your issue: why is it relevant to you and your audience and what do you want to say about it?

**Information**
- Interview your schoolmates in the playground at recess/lunch
- Record what they say

**Input**
- Discuss your interviews
- As a group, decide on what you think you might include
UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF THE DRAMATURGE (sometimes spelled dramaturg)

Definitions:

The Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary defines dramaturge as such: “1. a specialist in theatrical production. 2. A dramatist.”

The origin of the word is French from Greek dramatourgos (as DRAMA, -ergos = worker)

Dramaturgy is defined as, “1. The art of theatrical production; the theory of dramatics. 2. The application of this.”

So: the dramaturge is the company member – who works with the creative team, especially the playwright and the director – to combine the theories of theatre and how it works, with the art of theatre and what is effective from the audience’s point of view. Do you agree?

A dramaturge’s job is to help the playwright realise the play that’s in his or her head. Sometimes a playwright can find themselves unable to see the woods for the trees, or may think their intention is obvious when it’s not. Or they might avoid asking the tough questions of their play – such as questions of logic and credibility. The dramaturge, with some distance from the play and, ideally, an understanding of what the writer is trying to achieve, has that broad overview, can pose the rigorous questions. Essentially, a dramaturge provides a pair of fresh eyes – a stand-in for the audience, really – and asks the writer questions that the audience is bound to ask. They will also have a sense of the play’s rhythm, structure, tone – and can alert the writer to places where these are falling down, or check to ensure that what is there is what the writer intends. The important qualities in a dramaturge include sensitivity to the writer’s vision, a willingness to serve that vision rather than tell the playwright what to write, and a visceral understanding of the elements of drama.

- Hilary Bell, Playwright and Dramaturge
"About eight years ago, I performed in a verbatim play called In Our Name, at Belvoir. I remember spending a lot of time throughout rehearsal discussing and editing the script in cahoots with the director and the dramaturge. The play started with reams of interview transcripts the director, Nigel Jamieson, had collected from a family of former refugees to Australia. There were also interviews from other people who had been close to the family. I remember the lines being hard to learn, as there was so much detail to take in – every pause, ‘ah, um,’ was in the script – but once you had conquered the words, it was great fun to inhabit the differing thought patterns of the various characters I played (I think I played three or four characters).

The audience response at the end of the play was often very powerful. The piece incorporated media clips that were current and immediately relevant to that audience. Different charities and refugee support groups attended the show, as well as politicians: I recall having a very interesting chat with Andrew Wilkie after one performance.

Perhaps the most powerful aspect of the whole experience, though, was that the actual family the play was about could never attend the performance. They had been granted protection in New Zealand, and there were visa complications if they came to Australia to see the play. This seemed, and still seems, cruel. Being in this show, getting close to the experiences of a family with a life so very different to my own, well, that was a very special treat as an actor. I also enjoyed the challenge of trying to shape this brand new play into a piece of theatre. Theatre has always been a forum for social change, for minorities to have their voice heard – I think verbatim is without doubt the best medium for social inclusion in the theatre.” - Saskia Smith

Reference Article

ACTIVITY - TRUTH, ETHICS AND RESPONSIBILITY IN VERBATIM THEATRE

Now you have collected interview material from your peers, what are your responsibilities towards what they have told you?

Consider the below about playwright Alana Valentine:

‘Over the years, Valentine has come to know some of the women well and says she feels a responsibility to not only make a good drama but to tell the story truthfully, without inflicting any more pain. “Much of the writing of the play has been about noticing things, the (lingering) effects of the institution. That’s what interested me as much as the raw facts: how people had dealt with that legacy. Lots of people had a tough childhood, and (the incarcerated girls) had a particularly tough childhood: but that’s not enough, that’s not a play, that’s a report.”

Although some people may be empowered by telling their stories, documentary filmmakers and other writers dealing with people’s painful memories face ethical questions. “A lot of (the women) lack self-confidence, have self-esteem issues,” Valentine says. “They’ve grown up with the idea that they’re a bad girl and will never do any good. Some women have certainly risen above what they were handed, and we love stories like that, but a lot of them haven’t: they are still very damaged. When I was talking to them, they would become that twelve-year-old child. So I had to be very careful”’. - Rosalie Higson, interviewing Alana Valentine, for The Australian newspaper 2007.

‘Valentine uses her source material respectfully but freely, creating composite characters and fictional scenes.....this (is an) exceptional piece of healing - and unexpectedly humorous - theatre.’ - Jason Blake, The Sun Herald

- How are you planning to deal with these quandaries with the verbatim testimonials/interviews you have gathered?
SECTION 2:
A STUDY OF THIS PRODUCTION
RIVERSIDE’S PRODUCTION OF *PARRAMATTA GIRLS*

ACTIVITY - PROMOTIONAL DESIGN

Consider the promotional image (above) for this production. It has been taken from the website for the production. Answer the following questions;

- Is it an eye catching image? Why/why not?
- What stands out to you the most?
- Who wrote the play, and who is the director?
- What would you change about the image and why?

ACTIVITY - DESIGN YOUR OWN POSTER

Using the Riverside image (above), or by choosing your own image, you are going to design the promotional POSTER for this production.

- How do most people book tickets these days, and how is this reflected in your design?
- Where is the production on? How can you make this clear?
- Remember your poster’s function is MARKETING i.e. selling tickets. Who is your target audience? How are you going to reach out to them?
- Consider including a quote from the play, a review or a marketing by-line.
THE SET AND COSTUME DESIGN FOR THIS PRODUCTION

Read the following from set and costume designer Tobhiyah Stone Feller;

*Design statement:*

*It is a challenge to produce a production of a play in the wake of an earlier production which has been very successful because the earlier production lives on in the memories of audiences and creative alike as a touch stone for any production they may see in the future.*

*Director Tanya Goldberg and I have been motivated to find a new look and feel for this production while remaining true to the architecture of the Parramatta Girls Home.*

Two changes, one social/political and the other physical, since the 2007 Belvoir production have helped find a point of difference for our production, firstly the public awareness of the Home has increased due to the Royal Commission into Child Abuse and on a physical level there has been an arson attack on the Home.

*I have set the play in a ruin of the home, but not a literal part of the home, instead it is a collage of architectural elements, to show the collective memory of the women.*

*Simple furniture items such as timber benches and ladders are used to create levels and set the scene such as benches for a bed. The play structure has fluid transitions from the present to the past so this is how we want to show the playful and fluid nature of the scenes and underpin the fact that the 1960s scenes are not real, they are memories.*

*The colour and texture is simplified to capture the essence rather than the specifics of the place.*

*The actresses are dressed in clothing to suit their adult characters in 2003, with a colour pallet of blue, brown, grey, maroon and orange, which allows the cast to be linked as an ensemble in similar tones while also offering some individual personality.*

*When the women are their teenage selves they wear an apron over their adult clothing. The aprons have been designed to look weathered like the set, once again to remind the audience that time has passed since these events.* - Tobhiyah Stone Feller
Images of Tobiyah’s architectural study for the *Parramatta Girls* set design
ACTIVITY - THINKING ABOUT THE DESIGN PROCESS

- What do the above sketches picture? A real, or imaginary place?
- What does LWA stand for?
- Why do you think the designer did the above architectural studies?
- At what point in the process of completing the design do you think Tobiyah completed these sketches?
- What elements of these sketches can you see in the model boxes below?

Below are two images of the model of the Parramatta Girls set;
ACTIVITY - THE DESIGN MODEL BOX

- What is a model box? Have you seen one before?

- Why is it important? (The model box performs many functions, including; making sure the director and designer are thinking ‘on the same page’; allowing the director to accurately envisage to write the action onto the set; provide a clear and accurate image of the design to the actors on the first day of rehearsal; and providing a to-scale model for the designers to show to the set builders)

- Outline the DIFFERENCES between the model boxes pictured above. Drawing on your knowledge of the play, why are there two different set models? What does the disintegration represent?
- In small groups, WRITE a comprehensive list of all the PROPS used in the play. You will need your script. The Stage Manager would normally complete this task in a professional context. They would source adequate rehearsal props to stand in for the actual props. Rehearsal props must be ready on the first day of rehearsals, and extra things are often added - or sometimes items are subtracted if they seem extraneous. The designer sometimes writes the props list. The designer and the stage manager collaborate in the sourcing/purchasing of props. The props sourced must be coherent with the physical world of the play as created by the designer.

- Now, collect images from the internet of FIVE of the props on your list. Outline WHY you want these props - how do they fit in with the world of the play?

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**COSTUME DESIGN**

- Gather FOUR references (photographs, drawings) showing what teenage girls in the 1960s would have worn

- Now gather FOUR references (photographs, drawings) showing what inmates in the Girls’ Home in the 1960s would have worn.

- Compare and contrast what ‘free’ and ‘incarcerated’ girls might have been allowed to wear. What do the clothes of the day tell you about society’s view of young women?
SECTION 2:

A STUDY OF THE PLAY
SPOTLIGHT ON: THEMES OF THE PLAY

Here is a starting point for you to explore the themes of the play.

DISCUSSION

Some quotes and evidence have been included, but you can go much further as a class;

LONGTERM EFFECTS OF CHILD ABUSE

Judi speaks of the inability to completely heal through the analogy of her unhealed elbows. This is the opening image of the play, the opening story.

Just as the character of Judi reveals she was a prostitute from the ages of 18 - 24, many of the former Girls went into prostitution, some used drugs, many developed severe mental illness. Some did not make it out alive.

Lynette is unable to bring herself to even enter the reunion. Through the panicked fussing over her handbag, and her inability to get up off her seat, the audience forms the impression the memories of the home are too painful for Lynette the adult to deal with.

LYNETTE And that’s what every memory of being a child is like. There’s no safe place to go back to, it’s just the minute I start to remember the tearing in half begins. And the minute I walked in that gate, that’s when the tearing started up again.

Gayle speaks of the long-term effects of the abuse in the home as a stain that you can never remove.

GAYLE See. That’s it. That’s their mark that you can’t wash off.

Melanie and Lynette speak of the impact the abuse is having on their own ability to parent. The cycle of abuse is continuing generation to generation.
Most of the perpetrators of the abuse at the Girls’ Home are now dead. It has proved difficult to even track down and confirm the identities of many of the perpetrators. Not one was ever charged or even reprimanded.

**TRUST AND TRUTH - AND MEMORY**

Many of the characters could not trust their own parents. Gayle was abused by her parents, as was Melanie. Gayle talks of how no one believed her when she told them of the abuse she was subjected to in her family.

Maree was lied to by the Superintendent; told her parents were dead, she finds out they were in fact still alive. Why would he do this?

The characters argue about what really happened at the Girls’ Home. Right from the first scene, Judi and Gayle begin their ongoing argument about how badly they were treated.

GAYLE Do you think the dungeons will still be there?
JUDI You mean the isolation block?
GAYLE No, the dungeons.

*Behind her MELANIE is greeting CORAL with hello and a hug.*

JUDI There were never any dungeons.
GAYLE Well I remember them.
JUDI It was never that bad. (BEAT) It was harsh but it wasn’t all bad.

_They look at each other. There is another uncomfortable silence. GAYLE moves away._

In later scenes set in the remembered past, it emerges Gayle was something of a ‘head prefect’ type character, who would try and get other girls in trouble with the guards. This is all in the effort to secure her own survival. Truth is subjective, coloured by memory.

Many former inmates of the Home were too ashamed of being ‘Parramatta Girls’ to report their abuse at the time of it happening. Once they did come forward, it was often too late for anything to be done about it.
POWER VS POWERLESSNESS

Melanie and Coral emphasise how the reasons for girls being put into the home were incredible flimsy;

MELANIE Still. Ya musta done something ta end up in here.
CORAL What?
MELANIE (IRONIC) Ya musta deserved it.
CORAL Yeah something really serious, Melanie.
MELANIE Like skipping school.
CORAL Like you could scratch your bum the wrong way in those days and be considered uncontrollable.

The girls - and their families - had little to no recourse to challenge their charge.

Often due to riots in the Home, there were inquiries into the treatment of the Parramatta Girls. While these inquiries would sometimes result in the home closing down then being opened under a different name, there were never any meaningful changes/measures enacted to protect these children.

JUDGE You are charged with being neglected.
MARLENE But how can you charge me with neglect?
PLAYER I think you can see, your Honour, that this girl’s mental capacity is one of the impediments to her understanding simple moral concepts.

Aside from Coral’s mum (who helps her rescue her baby) and Marlene’s siblings, the girls had to leave their families as the adults in their lives were totally untrustworthy.

SURVIVAL

Gayle and Judi live with the shame of having tried to get onside with the guards and other authority figures in order to bargain for lenience in the way they were treated, even if it meant harsher treatment for one of the other girls. Gayle tried to appease the guards by being ‘house captain’, thinking this might earn her more lenient treatment. This was not the case, as we see in Act One, Scene Six in the Chapel.
MELANIE We didn’t get out of here without scars. We didn’t. We didn’t survive with our decency intact. We didn’t.

GIVING VOICE TO THE VOICELESS - BEING HEARD

Kerry is emphatic about facts, dates and details as she feels no one has ever listened to her before this moment. Now that they are listening, she wants to make sure they hear it right. The final sequence of the play is Coral, Kerry and Lynette standing up and making speeches about their experiences in the home. Finally, they are being heard and believed.

Judi initially does not want to ‘indulge’ in the pain they all went through.

JUDI This doesn’t change what they did. None of ‘em are here to make amends. It’s just a bunch of miserable old girls rakin’ over the past.

SPOTLIGHT ON: STRUCTURE AND STORY

The form of the play

Act One - Scenes One, Two, Three, Four, Five, Six, Seven, Eight, Nine.

Interval

Act Two - Scenes Ten, Eleven, Twelve, Thirteen, Fourteen, Fifteen, Sixteen, Seventeen, Eighteen, Nineteen, Twenty, Twenty One, Twenty Two.

The play moves between the present, 2003, and the remembered past.

Act One

Scene One: The past AND the present simultaneously. Maree exists as a memory. Is she Judi’s memory? We move quickly into the Brechtian technique of having Judi as her older self directly address the audience, in the present. Then, the other former Parramatta Girls start arriving at the reunion. It is November 2003.
Fluidly, Scene One switches into the past once the older women step through the iron gates that symbolised so much to them as children. The audience is suddenly thrust into the middle of the drama of Marlene and Melanie being sent to the home as children.

Just as suddenly, we are back in the present with Lynette. However, older Lynette is speaking to the memory of Maree - there is an overlap of time.

Having so many - and such seamless - time changes in this first scene sets up the theme of memory in the play. It also establishes the device that will be used throughout the play, with the same actors playing both their past and present selves. This doubling cements our empathy for these women; older women playing the young girls is very moving, as it reminds the audience the women have never fully escaped their past. They will always be Parramatta Girls.

**Scene Two:** the present day women are entering the 2003 reunion. Marlene describes the past event of being thrown into the home, out of the big car that took her away from her family.

> MARLENE They dragged me through here. Out of the black car. Black tinted windows. Into that processing cell.

Having just seen this dramatised in the previous scene, we can feel the lasting impact of her sudden and brutal incarceration into the home, as a child in the moment, and as an adult remembering the child.

Gayle and Judi confront one another, and this moment proves to be important later on in the play.

After this confrontation, we return to the past. Again it is Marlene’s first night, and Melanie is with her. Melanie reveals she has been to the home before. Gayle enters dressed as ‘Doctor Fingers’ and conducts an imaginary examination of Marlene, with the other girls watching on and taunting Marlene. This segues into a mocked up, larger-than-life ‘court’ scene, where the girls play the judge and lawyers ‘convicting’ Marlene of ‘mental retardation’ and neglect.

The girls sing as they change from their courtroom characters and attend to their chores. Marlene’s nightmare seems to be over - for now. Gayle enters (we are still in the past) and starts picking on Marlene. In an effort to stick up for Marlene, Melanie smacks Gayle in the mouth with a metal bucket. This brutal gesture catapults us back to the present.
The older Judi wants to go home. Coral regales her with an anecdote about the healing power of solidarity and laughter with the other girls. Judi agrees to stay.

Seamlessly, we transition to the past. Kerry and Coral are in the kitchen scrubbing the floor. Kerry is trying to goad Coral into climbing the lemon tree to pick lemons as a ploy to getting them into sick bay. From here, she wants to try and escape. We learn Gayle tried to escape last week. Coral refuses. There is considerably more gentleness in this scene than in previous scenes in the play.

Scene Three: immediately we are in the present again, with Lynette. She is still sitting outside the reunion, unable to go in.

We then move to one of the most ambiguous and multi-layered treatments of time in the play. Gayle in the present wanders around the Girls’ Home building. Her memories are so strong, she starts reliving them. The memory/ghost of 14-year-old Maree enters and speaks to Gayle the adult. Maree’s presence is soothing and reassuring as she coaxes Gayle out of the past and into the present, the reunion. In the present, Gayle recalls her fear of spiders, and the physical abuse she was subjected to by her ‘so-called parents’. Gayle talks of the mark that never washes off - the stain of the abuse that came with being a ‘Parramatta Girl’. With the help of Maree’s memory, Gayle remembers herself and puts her clothes on again. She exits to the reunion upstairs.

We are then in the remembered past. Kerry and Marlene are in the kitchen mashing potatoes. The food fight between the two girls is welcome comic relief at this point in the story. At the end of the dialogue between the two girls, Marlene transforms to her older self. Marlene talks about her experience as part of the stolen generation. The audience hears of Marlene’s brothers and baby sister simply disappearing.

Scene Four: the remembered past, in the dormitory. Coral wakes Melanie and tells her one of the guards raped her, and she has become pregnant.

We shift seamlessly to the present, and see Lynette going through a routine of affirmations and gestures that seem to have been given to her by a therapist. At the end of her routine, however, she is still unable to enter the home.

Scene Five: The remembered past. This is the first scene where the characters stay in the remembered past the entire scene. They are in the dining room, and Maree is entertaining the
girls with her impression of the Matron. The comic relief that comes from this impersonation quickly vanishes when the news of Coral’s pregnancy is revealed, which then leads to the revelation some of the girls in the home - including Melanie - have experienced sexual abuse from members of their own family.

**Scene Six:** The remembered past, in the Chapel at the home. Gayle is beaten for refusing to kneel during the hymn singing. Coral stands as well, with the hope the guard will punch her in the stomach, therefore terminating the pregnancy. The guard beating the girls in the Chapel is the one who raped her; we conclude then he knows by punching her in the stomach he will be aborting the baby he has learnt is his. Melanie and Marlene stand up in solidarity with the other girls, in the knowledge they will be bashed as well. Gayle is cruel to Coral and the other girls, claiming she didn’t ask for their help in the Chapel.

**Scene Seven:** The remembered past. Maree enters, singing. Gayle and Kerry enter with a soft toy they found in Maree’s bed. They taunt her for being a baby, and force her to rip of one of its arms to prove she isn’t a baby. Gayle is the ringleader here. Maree complies so that they leave her alone. We are left with the very moving image of Maree providing the healing and nurturing to the soft toy, when it is she who needs the nurturing more than anyone.

**Scene Eight:** The remembered past AND the present. Maree has been forced to tie a bed pan onto her self as punishment for wetting the bed. This reminds us she is really still a child, and a traumatised one; trauma is what induces regular bed wetting at her age. Lynette tries to soothe and nurture Maree. We see evidence of the friendship Lynette says she and Maree had. Maree reveals her parents are not really dead, despite being told this by the Superintendent. On Maree’s exit, we move back to the present of Lynette being unable to enter the reunion. Judi enters and tells Lynette she is indulging in the horrors of the past and needs to move on. Coral enters and the three women speak with great humour about the solidarity Parramatta Girls can find with one another. Lynette finally enters the reunion.

**Scene Nine:** The remembered past. Young Marlene is carrying a pot of stew to the girls in isolation. She spies that the gate has been left open. Kerry enters and Marlene tells her of the gate. Kerry decides to escape.

End of Act One.
Act Two

Scene Ten: Coral and Kerry enter as their older selves. They discuss the futile, meaningless methods that used to be used to judge a person’s character.

In the remembered past, Melanie, and the other girls, enter and begin to hang wet washing on a clothes line. (They enter singing - this music underlines the transition to the past). We learn that Coral has been taken to hospital to have her baby. Melanie informs Marlene she will not get to keep her baby. Gayle enters with a savagely scratched arm, having tried to remove a tattoo with surgical steel wool, supposedly under the care of the doctor.

Scene Eleven: In the remembered past, Maree and Lynette are admiring Judi’s score of cigarettes. Judi was given them by the guard, after he molested her. Maree reveals she had a baby that was given up for adoption. It is implied the father of the baby was one of the staff of the Home.

Scene Twelve: Gayle is in the isolation cell. She’s rubbing herself on the walls and bleeding profusely. *I should say here that while I think this scene is in the remembered past, it could also be in the present? What do you think?

Scene Thirteen: There is an overlap of time frames here. Gayle is still present on stage - presumably in the past - while Lynette and Judi speak to each other in the present. Judi’s story gives us hope about the ability to move beyond her past; she was granted some form of redemption and forgiveness in that she was able to adopt a daughter. Judi also reveals to Lynette she lied to Gayle about who she was and what she had done to become the Superintendent’s favourite.

Scene Fourteen: Using the Brechtian technique of having a narrator directly address the audience, Melanie (in the present) talks of her going ‘off the rails’ due to Coral’s disappearance. Around her, the women play their younger selves. They have been confined to the roof loft area. They are forced to scrub bird poo off the roof beams above them.

Scene Fifteen: Marlene as her younger self lives through a nightmarish scene with the girls circling her, dressed in their bedsheets. This is a montage of Marlene’s memories, snippets of dialogue and images that have scarred her. The scene crescendos to a huge and emotional scream from Marlene.
**Scene Sixteen:** Maree jams the door shut and takes a length of rope. She seems to be about to hang herself. She finds Melanie, who is cutting herself in an act of self-harm that she says centres her pain. Melanie introduces the cutting to the other girls, until Marlene forces her to stop. Marlene suggests they should try and escape. They set off outside, but the other inmates warn one of the most threatening guards has been sent for. So, Melanie and Marlene climb up onto the roof of the Home. They refuse to come down, instead throwing tiles at Jones. Marlene learns to bargain with the guards, and talks of her intention to encourage the girls to stick together.

Throughout this, there’s an interesting juxtaposition; Marlene (elder) is recalling her actions on the roof. Physically though, she is reliving them as if they are the present. This allows a seamless segue through to...

**Scene Seventeen:** The riot (happening in the remembered past). This is Alana Valentine’s dramatisation of one of the many riots at the Home. The riot continues until Lynette manages to silence the girls by telling them there’s an ambulance here for Maree - who has used her rope to hang herself.

**Scene Eighteen:** We move back to the reunion. Coral and Gayle are tidying up the mess left by the riot - again, a merging of past and present; the women of the present are still cleaning up the mess of the past. Coral managed to get her baby back from forced adoption. Gayle makes clear her image of fitting in well at the Home and being a ‘leader’ was false and meaningless, and that she was deeply wounded in more ways than one.

**Scene Nineteen:** A poignant scene where present day Marlene and Melanie talk about the way they have passed on their own abuse to their children. They have both been very rough with their kids, and regret this deeply. Melanie encourages Marlene to ask for her children’s forgiveness. Melanie offers Marlene an apology on behalf of the Home, and everything that has happened to Marlene.

**Scene Twenty:** Present day Lynette speaks to the memory of Maree. Lynette tells Maree how she loved her, and how much she misses her. At the reunion, the women (present) are starting to gather together for the speeches, wheeling in carts of sandwiches and setting up. Kerry is planning to make a speech, whether the organisers want her to or not. Marlene encourages this.

**Scene Twenty One:** Present day Gayle and Judi confront one another. Judi admits she was indeed called Fay McKell. She admits she did intentionally allow the Superintendent to sexually abuse her,
so she could feel she had some control over it happening. Gayle and Judi unite over the awareness it was wrong - beyond any shadow of doubt - for the adults working at the home to abuse the children. The scene finishes with Judi and Gayle embracing.

**Scene Twenty Two:** At the reunion, Coral makes a speech. She has organised an activity, that allows the women to symbolically wash away something of their past. Kerry grabs the microphone, as she threatened she would do. Kerry talks about how she had a part in getting the Home closed down once and for all. Lynette also steps forward and asks the guests to remember Maree, the other girls who did not survive their time in the home, and those who found the thought of coming back to the site for the reunion too painful because of what they went through. (The memory of) Maree enters, and sings ‘The Singing Bird’, Maree’s song, with Lynette.

Judi moves to an exit door and thinks it is locked. She goes into a panic. Coral comes and reassures her, showing her the door is in fact open and that she can leave any time she wants to.

The play finishes with Gayle. She tells the audience how she won a ‘loveliest mother’ contest - and she feels that is her greatest achievement. Having seen Gayle behave cruelly to the other girls to survive in the home, this is a moment of redemption and understanding between the audience and the character, the past and the present...

**ACTIVITY: STAGING THE STRUCTURE**

In small groups, experiment with the shifts between past and present. Create tableaux of the characters shifting from one time frame to another, and the moments when the time frames overlap. Now move your tableaux, create moved moments of transition. Try adding music to underscore the transitions.

**ACTIVITY: MOVED SYNOPSIS**

Choosing the moments in the play you see as the key moments, work in small groups to create a moved synopsis of the whole play. You will choose eight key moments for each group. Create a tableaux for each of these moments, and choose a line of dialogue from this moment. Have one member of the group say the line aloud, as part of the frozen picture you create.
ACTIVITY: TIMELINE

Convert the scene synopsis above into two timelines: one for the action of the past, one for the action of the present.

SPOTLIGHT ON: THEATRICAL STYLES/TECHNIQUES

Violence is enacted by imaginary, invisible characters, for example in Act One, Scene Six when the girls react to being struck by imaginary guards. Stylised enacting of violence - not akin to most verbatim theatre. Or is it? Note there are no male actors in the play.

Juxtaposition: Act One, Scene Six, the hymn continues as an underscore to the brutal abuse by the guards. The (imaginary) guard beats Gayle for refusing to kneel in Chapel.

Expressionistic, almost cartoonish theatricality of the Doctor (played by Gayle) examining Marlene in Act One Scene Two adds to the nightmarish quality of Marlene’s experience. The use of the girls as a chorus furthers this, and the sheet becomes an almost ghost-like prop as well as a symbol of all things medical. Having Gayle double as the doctor tells the audience of Gayle’s high position in the pecking order amongst the girls, Gayle’s ability to be cruel and possibly lead some of the cruelty.

The nightmarish quality is continued in the next scene, with the cast doubling as the lawyers, judge, jury etc in the mock trial of Marlene. Marlene is a small and frightened child - as the play explores her memories, the audience senses her accusations are as absurd and as this surreal courtroom scene. She is terrified, and innocent, and cannot understand why she is being accused of such awful things.

Lightning fast transitions between characters with actors playing the same role. Adding to the notion that memory is fluid and fallible, we are often pondering whose perspective we are seeing things from, whose memories are accurate, and what the truth really is. Physical transformation from the young girl character to the older woman character, for example Marlene at the end of Act One, Scene Three. We see the transformation of the character before our eyes.
‘Childish’ playacting, for example having the girls dance around with mop heads at the end of the court scene in Act One Scene Two. We are reminded these really are just kids.

Brechtian use of songs and music. ‘The Water is Wide’ shifts the mood completely at the end of the court scene in Act One Scene Two, and provides momentary balm to soothe Marlene’s ordeal of being ‘charged with neglect’.

The use of humour - sometimes it is the innocence of the children (Kerry and Corals scene about their plan to rub their lips with lemons comes to mind). Sometimes it is the dry wit of the present day ladies. There are often moments of humour to offset the most intensely harrowing stories, for example the rapid-fire delivery of the story of the Captain Cook Cruise (Act One, Scene Eight) is welcome relief to the sadness of Lynette’s incapacity, and Maree’s devastating news her parents are in fact alive, not dead as she was told.

Setting is transformed before our eyes as well. For example, the dormitory scene Act One, Scene Four. The other girls tuck Melanie into bed, and this tells us it is night time in the dormitory. The girls participating in the scene changes adds to the surreal/dreamlike quality of their remembered past, and adds to their solidarity as former Parramatta Girls; they are all reliving the experience of being interred there.

Symbols of domesticity: appear throughout the play. Bedsheets, scrubbing brushes, potato mashers...What does this prevalence of domestic paraphernalia tell us about the view of the girls in the Home?

**SPOTLIGHT ON: CHARACTER**

**CORAL, 16/58 years old, indigenous**

Adult Coral is one of the organisers of the reunion. She speaks of having attended similar events in the past, gatherings of former Parramatta Girls. Young Coral reveals she was impregnated by one of the guards at the home. This guard then brutally bashes her to deliberately abort the baby. Coral’s baby was forcibly removed from her, but she and her mother went and got her child back. Coral has attended many reunion events and plays a pivotal part in organising the 2003 reunion that forms the heart of the play.
MAREE, 14, non-indigenous
Maree is a memory and a ghost. Told both her parents were killed in a car accident, she in fact finds out they are still alive. She does not know why she was told they had died. Maree is subjected to humiliation having wet the bed. The Matron treats her especially cruelly. Maree eventually takes her own life. Maree appears as a memory to Lynette and to Gayle as their adult selves.

JUDI, 16/59, non-indigenous
Judi’s real name is Fay McKell. She tried to regain some semblance of control and power by allowing the guards to sexually abuse her. This made her unpopular with Gayle. Judi went into prostitution and acquired an extensive criminal record. Judi thinks a lot of the women are indulging in their past traumas. She eventually comes to see there is healing in sharing the truth with the other women.

LYNETTE, 14/57, non-indigenous
Lynette has a ‘posh’ background. She comes from a wealthy Eastern Suburbs family, and was educated at the private girls’ school, St Catherine’s Waverley, before her incarceration. The fact she comes from a more privileged background contrasts with the lower socio-economic status of most of the other girls. Lynette seems to have developed some sort of anxiety disorder. She hesitates to enter the reunion and sits hurriedly sorting through every item in her handbag. She was very close to Maree, and present day Lynette speaks to an imaginary Maree in the opening scene. It is revealed Lynette and Maree were close friends. Maree’s death has haunted Lynette.

MELANIE, 15/58, non-indigenous
Melanie has a foul mouth and a wicked sense of humour. She was incarcerated in the home because she ran away from her own family home. In Act One, Scene Five, Melanie alludes to the possibility she was sexually abused by her own father. She later reveals she has had to protect her own daughter, and her granddaughter, from being abused by Melanie’s father. Melanie tries to protect the other girls throughout the play, starting with Marlene.

KERRY, 15/58, indigenous
Kerry plays an important role in the opening scene, providing exposition as to dates and details about the Home’s history. Kerry has been in institutionalised care her whole life.

KERRY Oh. I’m a State ward. They charged me with being uncontrollable at three months old.

Kerry escapes from the Home at the end of Act One, but is caught by the police and returned there. She is given a ‘good going over’, as in a vicious beating, as punishment. We see her spirit has been broken by this punishment. Kerry says no one has ever believed her when she tells them what happened to her in the home. She has a chance to be heard at the reunion, and tells the audience how she had a part in having the home closed down.

MARLENE, 13/57, Indigenous
Marlene arrives at the Girls’ Home an absolute innocent. She is the youngest of all the characters in the play. On her first night, she admits to being terrified, and she cannot believe such awful things as Melanie describes could happen in the home. Marlene’s innocence is shattered when the doctor accuses her of having had sexual intercourse. The other girls are quick to pounce on this accusation. We see much of the play through Marlene’s eyes, especially during those scenes in the remembered past. It is Marlene who incites the riot, and leads the girls to try and negotiate with the authorities.

GAYLE, 16/59, non-indigenous
Gayle took the role of ‘House Captain’ as her survival mode in the home. She reveals she was physically and emotionally abused by her step-father and mother. She is haunted by memories of the ‘dungeons’ in the home. Gayle seems to treat the other inmates with cruelty and disdain. She talks of experiencing a ‘little bit of power’. Gayle stands up for Marlene in the riot scene, when the girls protect Marlene from the guard. Gayle subjected herself to horrific self-harm in the home.

The play ends with Gayle telling the audience her greatest achievement has been her award for ‘loveliest mother’.
ACTIVITY: CHARACTER STUDY

Choose one of the main characters, as per the above list. Write a character description of this character. Reflect on the way the actress playing the role portrayed the character. Why do you think this particular actress was cast in the role?

ACTIVITY: OTHER CHARACTERS

Can you list other ‘minor’ characters you remember? Who played these roles? Why do you think these roles were doubled? There are likely to be practical reasons - few theatre companies can afford to stage plays with large casts - but consider the dramatic impact of the doubling too.

ACTIVITY - A LETTER TO SEND

Choose one of the main characters from the play, and write a letter from this character to a person outside of the home. What does your character want to say most of all? To whom? What do they choose to hide and keep secret? How adept are they at written expression and why?

ACTIVITY - STAGE YOUR LETTERS

Read your letter to the class. Stay in character.

Place your character in the ‘hot seat’ (alone, on stage, in front of the class, answer questions from your peers in character).

Form a small group. Collate your letters, stage them as a short performance piece and stage them to perform to the class. So the letters form your text. You could create moments of transition between each letter - consider stage action, props, music etc, as well as the elements of drama, of course.
REFLECTION ON, AND EXPLORATION OF, THE PLAY-
FURTHER PRACTICAL TASKS

ACTIVITY - REVIEW

You are a reviewer; write a 200 word review of the production of Parramatta Girls that you just saw. Make a clear choice about where your review would be published, and tailor your writing to suit that audience.

ACTIVITY- EXPLORING THE TEXT EXPERIENTIALLY

JUDGE You are charged with being neglected.
MARLENE But how can you charge me with neglect?

Imagine being in Marlene’s situation.
Now imagine it being your daughter who has been charged with neglect. Try and get her charge revoked so she can stay at home. Speak to the judge, jury and courtroom.

DISCUSS

JUDI This doesn’t change what they did. None of ‘em are here to make amends. It’s just a bunch of miserable old girls rakin’ over the past.

JUDI But the suffering here isn’t your whole story is it?
LYNETTE No. But..
JUDI No but you get a certain thrill from dwelling on it.
LYNETTE I do not.

- Do you agree with Judi? Is it possible the reunion, and even the play itself, could have a counter-productive effect? Why or why not?
- Is it possible to ‘indulge’ in horrible experiences?
KERRY We can go to the cemetery on a Sunday and to the laundromat on a Friday. We’re allowed into the pictures and we line up with everyone else but we can only sit down the front and we have to leave just before the picture is finished. We’re not allowed into any government buildings in town neither.
MARLENE Why you tellin me this stuff?
KERRY Well. You’re the same.
MARLENE No way, not me.
KERRY Yeah.
MARLENE You callin me a boong?
KERRY Nah.
MARLENE Yeah, ya are.
KERRY If the cap fits.
MARLENE Well it doesn’t fit, al’rite?

Pause.

KERRY Soon tell.
MARLENE What?
KERRY When ya come of age you’ll know.
MARLENE How do ya figure that?
KERRY Boongs can’t vote.
MARLENE What’s that?
KERRY Like, for the government.
MARLENE That’s not true.
KERRY Yeah. We part of the flora and fauna girl.
MARLENE Don’t say we.
KERRY Ok.
MARLENE ‘Cause I’m not a boong.
KERRY How come?
MARLENE Boongs are drunks and they don’t work and they’re real dirty.
KERRY How do you know so much about them then?
MARLENE Everyone knows that.
KERRY So what are you?
MARLENE My Dad. He’s different.
KERRY But he’s black.
MARLENE But he’s a good one. There are lots of good ones. Not all blacks are boongs.

*Pause, KERRY nods, knowingly.*

KERRY Yeah, but all boongs are black, sister.

- What are the girls talking about in this scene?
- When did indigenous Australians get to vote?
- Why does Marlene take offence to what Kerry is saying?

Research other ‘rules’ that existed in Australia concerning the segregation of white and black Australians. How long did these rules exist for?
Cite examples of racism towards indigenous Australians that still exists in Australia today. Draw on audiovisual material as well.

In the play, Marlene, Kerry and Coral (and many of the other girls, such as Maree) speak of having had their own children, or their siblings, taken way from them. As a class, gather your knowledge of the forced removal of indigenous children in Australia - the Stolen Generation.

**DISCUSS**

KERRY Come on or I’ll go without you.
MARLENE remains frozen to the spot. KERRY gives her a hug goodbye. Then she exits down the vomitory. MARLENE picks up the pot of stew. She looks out, wistfully. Lights fade.

INTERVAL

Why does Act One end with Kerry’s escape?
ACTIVITY: STAGING SCENES

1. Stage the courtroom scene. Experiment with using over the top, cartoonish voices and physicality for your character. Examine the effect of including the mops and sheets in the staging of the scene. Create your stage action carefully - for example, where do you place Marlene?

2. Stage the nightmare scene, Act Two Scene Fifteen. Use the sheets the girls have. Again, experiment with sound, sound effects, vocal effects, and music. Create stage action that captures the nightmarish quality of Marlene’s experience. Think about how the characters move.