

THE 7 STAGES OF GRIEVING

BY WESLEY ENOCH AND DEBORAH MAILMAN



**QUEENSLAND
THEATRE**

**THEATRE
Grin & Tonic
TROUPE**

WELCOME!

Welcome to the Education Resources for *The 7 Stages of Grieving* by Wesley Enoch and Deborah Mailman. These resources are designed to work alongside the play and offer inspiration before and after your visit to the theatre. There are worksheets and activities as well as ideas for responding. Feel free to pull these resources apart and use what works best for you and your students.

Best, Heidi Irvine

Producer, Education and Youth Programs.

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AT THE THEATRE:

We'd like to welcome you to the experience of attending a live performance – while we know you get all the etiquette stuff, here's a reminder of some simple information you can pass on to your students.

- We ask you to get involved in the performances by applauding and laughing at appropriate moments. If you have a question – ask your teacher at the interval/end of the show or one of the cast, if you have a chance for a Question & Answer session.
- Food or drink is not permitted in the theatre
- Live theatre is different to TV – the actors on stage can hear and see you and there are other members of the audience to think about. If you need to leave the performance for any reason, please ensure this is done quickly and quietly and at an appropriate break in the action
- Switching your phone to silent isn't the only thing to do. Please ensure that you switch off your mobile phone and leave it in your bag before the performance begins. The glow of the iPhone screen is obvious to others and is very distracting!

Queensland Theatre would like to take this opportunity to alert members of the audience that this production and resource contains names and visual representations of people recently dead, which may be distressing to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. All care has been taken to acquire the appropriate permission and show all proper respect.

THE FINE PRINT

Original Location: Bille Brown Studio, Queensland Theatre. 17 March – 31 March, 2015. Writers: Wesley Enoch and Deborah Mailman

Remaining a vital masterwork 20 years after it was penned by Wesley Enoch and Deborah Mailman, *The 7 Stages of Grieving* is a wise and powerful play about the grief of Aboriginal people and the hope of reconciliation. In this one-everywoman show, Chenoa Deemal (*Mother Courage and Her Children*) spins poignant stories of different people from different mobs – tear-streaked tales of tragedy go hand-in-hand with jubilant celebrations of simple survival.

Funny, devastatingly sad, politically relevant and culturally profound as it traverses the phases of Aboriginal history, *The 7 Stages of Grieving* is an invitation to face hard truths, to join hands and grieve. It shares true and personal stories that need to keep being told. And perhaps most importantly, it opens a dialogue about the issues that separate and unite Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

“Watching that hit such an emotional chord, it stayed with me for years. Seeing a visual representation of a beautiful and established culture suddenly wiped clear with the stroke of a hand was emotionally jarring and brought to my attention how powerful theatre can be.” Chenoa Deemal

Suitability: Years 9 -12

Duration: 55 minutes (no interval)

Warnings: Adult references to death and dying. Supernatural themes and theatricalised violence.

Director: Jason Klarwein

Designer: Jessica Ross

Lighting Designer: Daniel Anderson

Sound Designer: Justin Harrison

Cast: Chenoa Deemal

ELEMENTS

- Mood
- Tension
- Role
- Time

RECOMMENDED THEMES FOR DISCUSSION

The 7 Stages of Grieving brings to the stage many social, political and historical issues concerning Australians.

Issues of past and present, from discrimination, injustice, family unity and oppression, loss, the stolen generation, loss of culture and land/home, to reconciliation, fighting for survival and deaths in custody are given theatrical expression.

ABOUT THE PLAY

The 7 Stages of Grieving is an exploration of the personal and political history of Indigenous Australia as an expression of our grieving.

Wesley Enoch

The play follows the experiences of an Indigenous “everywoman” and chronicles the grief present in her life and the means of expressing it. The stories acknowledge real events, family histories and personal experiences to create a mixture of fact and fiction. The histories and lives explored cover over 200 years of political relationships with migrant Australia – a history of “... *grief, misunderstanding and injustice.*” [Enoch] One story is created from many, a universal theme is told through the personal experiences of one character.

ACTIVITIES AND RESOURCES

The following ideas and resources can be used both pre and post-show.

BEFORE YOU START...

What do you know about the play?

What does the title make you think the play is going to be about?

What do you know about Aboriginal and Indigenous culture in Australia?

Can you name some prominent Indigenous Australians?

Can you name some landmark cases or historical moments which have impacted Indigenous Australian history?

Do you know what the play is referencing when it discusses “The 7 Stages of Grieving”?

The play is performed by one actor. What do you think the challenges are in performing a solo work?

CHARACTER MAP

Create a “map” of the main character and with lines link the stories and relationships in her life. This is useful to do directly after viewing the performance so students understand the narrative and nature of the work.

STARTER QUESTION

What experiences of Australian theatre have you had? Define what makes all these examples “Australian”. What would you define as Australian theatre? Think about: images, characters, themes and issues, symbols and metaphors, language, setting and landscape, cultural and political context, comedy and irony, atmosphere, element of biography and Australian identity (Hint: If it was performed overseas how would other audiences identify it as Australian AND when performed here what do Australian audiences identify with on a variety of levels?)

SCRIPT EXCERPT

PHOTOGRAPH STORY

A chair scrapes across a wooden floor, footsteps recede, a clock ticks. Projected are images of an open suitcase filled with family photographs, old and new. The progression of slides brings us closer into the details of the photographs.

In the house of my parents where I grew up, there’s a suitcase, which lives under the old stereo in the front room. The room is full of photographs, trophies, pennants, memories of weddings, birthdays, christenings and family visits. A testimony to good times, a constant reminder. But this suitcase, which resides under the old stereo tightly fastened, which lies flat on the floor comfortably out of reach, safe from inquisitive hands or an accidental glance.

In this suitcase lies the photos of those who are dead, the nameless ones and here they lie, passing the time till they can be talked of again. Without a word we remove the photo of my Nana from her commanding position on the wall and quietly slip her beneath the walnut finish. And without a sound push her into the shadow.

Everything has its time ... Everything has its time ... Now.

- In pairs ask students to read the scene aloud.
- Encourage students to try out extreme possibilities as actors might do during rehearsals.
- Ask pairs to go through the scene twice, trying out two contrasting sets of desires/movement/intentions and share their work.
- Ask students to think about replaying the scene in a range of different scenarios and locations/contexts, for example; as a hurried mobile phone conversation, in a really noisy assembly, passing notes between each other in class.
- How do the circumstances and surrounding affect what is being said?
Does
- the audience pick up on different agendas or attitudes when the surroundings change?

SCENE BREAKDOWN TEMPLATE

You can use this template to analyse a scene, giving students an opportunity to break apart its components for responding.

SCENE:

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT: *Where does the character start and in what state do they end the scene?*

OBJECTIVES, TACTICS, AND OBSTACLES: *List these and whether you think the characters are successful or fail in achieving these...*

BLOCKING: *Draw a small diagram of the stage and movement paths of the characters.*

PHYSICALITY: *What is the physicality of the characters on stage and what changes/develops?*

THINGS TO REMEMBER: *Is there one thing you want to remember about the scene?*

“All plays demonstrate at least one thing in common, the basic human need to give voice to stories that communicate something of value or something one has experienced or learned... the function of the story teller ...is to make his or her experience the experience of those who listen or watch.”

(James Hillman, in the introduction to *The 7 Stages of Grieving*)

DRAMATIC FORM: ONE PERSON PERFORMANCE/MONODRAMA

This is the term used to refer to a one-woman show. In *The 7 Stages of Grieving* there is only ever one actor on stage. She performs a number of monologues and transforms into or role plays a variety of other roles/characters as she recalls them from her memory.

It is unique, like the culture it represents – stressing the importance of family and where you are from and challenges our ‘western’ concept of a play’s format. It draws on traditional and contemporary arts. Cultural issues surrounding grieving are brought together using projection, contemporary performance and modern theatrics to explore a form of ‘*cultural hybridity*’ (Enoch).

The play provides wide range of material that is rich with opportunities for improvisation and devised theatre. The actor plays many characters, transforming before the audience. This allows her to bring to the stage not only her story but the story of her family and her people. Transformation of actor supports her presentation as the everywoman symbolically and theatrically, it engages us imaginatively and takes us into the stories told.

DRAMATIC STRUCTURE: EPISODIC

The 7 Stages of Grieving has 24 short scenes, each with its own complication. This type of structure is referred to as episodic and it greatly affects the shape and rhythm of the play (it doesn’t drive straight to a climax then have a resolution as in realism).

The episodic structure of the play influences the use of time, place, rhythm and character. It enables:

time to jump between past, present and future;

place to shift and change without changing the set;

rhythm can rise and fall freely without losing underlying tension;

character a large variety of characters can be used, each episode can involve new characters without needing to introduce them thoroughly. The exposition stage in realism carefully introduces each character’s personality and history.

The episodic structure of *The 7 Stages of Grieving* expects the audience to make connections through a experiencing a number of different scenes which focus on the theme of grief. The structure is epic as it spans a long period of time and place. *The 7 Stages of Grieving* makes use of some of the techniques of Brecht’s Epic Theatre such as placards, projections, time span, alienation, court report, and direct address. It is not Brechtian, as the production never attempts to emotionally disengage its audience.

If you are responding to the performance, here are some resources that will help students to get writing. Both of these resources can easily be reproduced as handouts for your students.

HOW CAN I USE THE ELEMENTS OF DRAMA?

The Elements of Drama can enhance a student's understanding of a production and its effectiveness.

The Elements of Drama include:

- Focus
- Space
- Role
- Relationships
- Time/Place/Situation
- Tension
- Structure
- Language/Sound
- Movement/Timing/Rhythm
- Atmosphere/Mood/Symbol/Moment
- Audience Engagement/Dramatic Meaning

Here are some activities which can enhance your students understanding of some of the elements.

Character: Character exercises are vital and you may want to start with exercises that focus on awareness of facial expression, tone of voice, body language and movement. You could incorporate improvisations here or choose excerpts from scripts. Some concepts you might also like to explore here are making offers, accepting offers, accepting and committing to the fiction, conviction/belief, status, and action/reaction.

Time/Place/Situation/Tension: Improvisation is key here. Play around with scenes that allow students to explore not only some typical situations but some unusual ones as well e.g. underneath a rock, at the bottom of the ocean etc. Really focus on the concept of conflict here.

Language/Sound: Voice workshops are a brilliant starting point. Have students become aware of their breath, throat and diaphragm. Consider doing an accent workshop. Have them work with scripts to explore clarity, volume, pitch, pace, inflection, emphasis and pause. Consider how atmosphere can be created using soundscapes and body percussion. Explore scenes that use no sound or language.

Atmosphere/Mood/Symbol: Watch some film excerpts that use music to guide the audience's feelings in a scene. Consider the use of colour and set in costumes and what they mean to the audience.

Audience Engagement/Dramatic Meaning: At the conclusion of every exercise always ask the class what it was about the element of drama that made the audience feel engaged in the action on stage and what they understood was happening on stage because of that element. In adding this in to your classroom discussion you are helping your students become critical thinkers and theatre appreciators.

Writing a Review – Where do I start?

After watching a performance, you will have quite a strong sense of whether or not it was effective. This is usually reinforced through your feelings of whether or not you were engaged, moved, excited or disinterested in the performance. The following categories and questions may assist students in writing a review.

Introduction

Include the name of the play you are reviewing, the name of the playwright, the theatre where the performance was held and the date of the performance; if you choose, you may also indicate your overall impression of the play.

Plot

This is the actual action that happens on stage. Try to reduce the whole story into a brief paragraph that includes all the main events.

Discuss themes and issues

Outline the themes and issues that you feel were important in the play. The themes and issues carry the message of the play and are important in helping the audience gain meaning from the performance. You should also discuss your impression of the directorial concept in your review. Comment on the director's interpretation of the play, and how the choice of dramatic form and performance style helps to communicate the play's themes and issues.

Analyse character objective and motivation

Describe and analyse the characters. To find the character's objective, ask yourself the question: What does the character want to achieve by the end of the play? To find the character's motivation, ask yourself the question: Why does the character want to achieve their goal?

Evaluate the performer

(Give examples wherever possible!)

- How well did the actors use body language to express their character?
- Were their movements and gestures appropriate for their character?
- How well did they use their voice to express character and deliver lines?
- How focused did they seem during their performance?
- How convincing did the performer seem in their portrayal of their character?

Comment on the use of the elements of production

- Discuss how effective you think the use of sound, lighting, set and costume were in the performance
- Were the costumes suitable for the characters? How did the choice of colours and designs suit the overall look of the performance?
- Was the set an effective use of space? Was the set easy for the actors to manoeuvre around? In terms of colour and layout, did its design enhance the performance?
- How did the elements of production support the directorial concept?
- Did the signs and symbols used within the production enhance meaning?
- Was special lighting used at any time for a particular effect?
- Did the use of live or recorded sound enhance or detract from the performance?
- How did lighting and sound establish location and create atmosphere?

Conclusion

Sum up the overall success of the play.

Attached below is a *Responding to Live Theatre Worksheet*. It is a way to get students thinking about their live theatre experience and is broken down into sections so they can plot out their ideas easily and simplistically. It can be the beginnings of a review, an essay response or even a short response exam.

Sample Questions Starters...

- Have students deconstruct the characters and the effectiveness of the actors portrayal performance as an ensemble;

- Does the play explore isolation authentically? How does the set and the overall design of the play support/detract from this? Think about sound, lighting and set;
- Explore the themes of mood, role, time and movement and the way they were portrayed through the use of set, music and design.

EXAMPLE RESPONDING TASK ONE

CONTEXT

“The Director’s Role: You are the obstetrician. You are not the parent of this child we call the play. You are present at its birth for clinical reasons, like a doctor or midwife. Your job most of the time is simply to do no harm. When something does go wrong, however, your awareness that something is awry--and your clinical intervention to correct it--can determine whether the child will thrive or suffer, live or die.”

Frank Hauser.

TASK

Does *The 7 Stages of Grieving* thrive or suffer, live or die? That is, does the show succeed in making the questions in Enoch and Mailman’s play relevant and engaging for a contemporary audience? As an academic writer, you will employ your detailed and specific knowledge and understanding of drama to analyse and evaluate how effectively the performance employed the dramatic languages to communicate dramatic meaning to the audience.

- Your essay should address the following:
- What are the dominant themes, questions, or messages in the play?
- How has the story been reframed or updated to place it in a contemporary context?
- What styles and conventions were used? Were they effective?
- Were the characters well-developed and engaging?
- Were mood, tension, and/or dramatic focus effectively managed to engage the audience?
- How were symbol and/or contrast manipulated to communicate dramatic meaning?
- Overall, was the play engaging and relevant for a contemporary audience?

You need to clearly articulate your argument, ensuring that you justify your evaluation with specific examples from the performance.

EXAMPLE RESPONDING TASK TWO

Choose several scenes then recall from the production the identifying thematic concerns and ideas, performance style, techniques and conventions and the impact these production choices had on you and the audience. As a whole, evaluate the impact of Purcell's directorial choices on your appreciation and understanding of Enoch's text.

'The 7 Stages of Grieving' is about politicising the content and the exploration in form from a traditional/contemporary Murri viewpoint. This exploration is part of the continuity of Indigenous cultures and is important to the development of a modern, uniquely Australian voice. (Wesley Enoch, 1996)

How does the performance highlight the contemporary issues for Indigenous Australians? Does it detract from or empower the audience's view of these issues?

