

**SYDNEY
THEATRE
CO
EDUCATION**

**DESIGN
SKETCHBOOK**



A Sydney Theatre Company and Moogahlin Performing Arts production

THE VISITORS

**BY JANE HARRISON
DIRECTED BY WESLEY ENOCH**

DIRECTOR'S NOTE: WESLEY ENOCH

We are surrounded by the need for discussion and debate, we have friendly disagreements all the time, we argue and oppose sometimes for very personal reasons as we clash over values and ideology but as a society the key is finding some way forward rather than being paralysed by division.

There was no way of knowing *The Visitors* would be playing at this time when we are in the midst of a debate concerning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander recognition in the Australian Constitution. There was no way of foreseeing with such accuracy how this play written ten years ago would land so neatly in a time slot that paralleled the lead up to the date of the referendum. At the time of writing this message on the date still hasn't been set by the government but many are speculating it will be called for 14 October (the closing night of this show at the Sydney Opera House). 2023 marks ten years since the play was first written; 30 years since Jane Harrison and I first worked together on a play called *Stolen*; 50 years since the opening of Sydney Opera House (which sits on Tubowgule, where the play is set). All these coincidences are enough to lead a pragmatic person like myself to believe in fate and the power of spirits.

This show simultaneously leads us to a past and preferred future. It takes us back to the arrival of the First Fleet in Sydney Cove and asks: 'what if' that moment was different? What if there was a way for the visitors to hear the generous message of welcome? What if they understood the power of connection to Land for the First Peoples? Sure, there is disagreement and debate about what is the best course of action and these people – like all people – find it hard to stick to the process but through calm investigation and evidence they find a consensus that is right for them and consistent with their values and cultural obligations.

This play asks an audience to reimagine a seminal moment in time and take a divergent path from the timeline we have lived. We have been interested in the Indigenous Futurism movement which changes the perspectives of our history and projects us into a world where technologies merge with our heritage to create new societies. Like and MCU multiverse platform, this play imagines a world different to ours.

A play is only a set of ideas performed for an audience but we as Australians are being asked to imagine a different world to the one, we currently occupy, and make a difference to change

the world in the future. This play is an argument laid out by actors, but every voting Australian is grappling with similar arguments now: shall we take a different path to the one we currently walk? Should we find new ways to walk together in the future? Whatever your decision, we must all hold on to the need for respectful and passionate debate to get us through – calm investigation and interrogated evidence for the decision we are about to make.



NOTES ON THE PRODUCTION: MOOGAHLIN PERFORMING ARTS



The Visitors by Murrawarri playwright Jane Harrison first came to the attention of the Moogahlin Performing Arts company in 2013, after being submitted for the inaugural Yellamundie National First Peoples Playwriting Festival. After a two-week development with a First Peoples dramaturg, director, and seven actors, the play went on to a further development workshop at Playwriting Australia and Melbourne Theatre Company in 2013. Then in 2014, as part of the Cybec Electric play reading series, it was presented and directed by Wiradjuri theatremaker Leah Purcell with Melbourne Theatre Company and Melbourne Indigenous Arts Festival. The play had a second workshop at Melbourne Theatre Company in 2016, and a Next Stage development in 2019 with Moogahlin Performing Arts. Moogahlin then premiered the work at Sydney Festival in 2020, directed by Bunaba man and Moogahlin co-founder, Frederick Copperwaite, with an all-male cast, including John Blair, Damion Hunter, Colin Kinchela, Nathan Leslie, Leroy Parsons, Glenn Shea, and Kerri Simpson. We were preparing to tour the work in 2021, but these plans were delayed for some years due to COVID-19. Now with partners Sydney Theatre Company and Sydney Opera House, Moogahlin are restaging the work in a production directed by Quandamooka man Wesley Enoch, followed by a short tour. There are also plans to take this important

story across NSW, then nationally and internationally. In restaging *The Visitors*, Moogahlin have spent many months considering our role as the First Peoples partner in this production, and the cultural processes that would inform the artistic development of this First Peoples' story. Moogahlin's uniqueness as a company lies in our philosophy and approach to making work, in which we uphold interconnected First Peoples' values of respect for the diversity of First Peoples' experiences, languages, land, water, air, practices, and lore; responsibility in a leadership role and responsibilities to create opportunities and contribute to culturally-safe work spaces; relationships to build sustainable relationships through our strategic partnership model; reciprocity in creating cultural arts exchange opportunities with community and artists locally, nationally, and internationally; relevance by engaging in critical discourse from a First Peoples world view, seeking community feedback on our work and seeking community engagement in all levels of creation.

In recognising that *The Visitors* is a work of speculative historical fiction, Moogahlin acknowledges that it is a story based on our history and heritage as First Peoples of Australia. In working through a culturally informed process, Moogahlin engaged Aunty Yvonne Simms, a Bidjigal and Gweagal woman from the La Perouse community as our Cultural Liaison to guide and connect us with the appropriate knowledge sharers and to immerse our creative team into the process of creating the world of the play, first created by Harrison. Through Aunty Yvonne's guidance and connections we have been supported by Aunty Barbara Simms, Uncles Greg and Vic Simms, Corina Norman and Jordan Ryan-Hennessey, who have all worked closely with lead creatives on the history of their people, the set, costume, and prop design, and the use of language terms in the play.

In consideration of creating the weapons referred to in the script, a dialogue was created around whether the weapons would be made in a culturally-informed way, as weapons usually are, or if they would be imagined as props created by Sydney Theatre Company makers. It was decided that in consultation with the Elders that the actors would be working with objects designed from historical cultural designs found in the Sydney Harbour and river

NOTES ON THE PRODUCTION: MOOGAHLIN PERFORMING ARTS

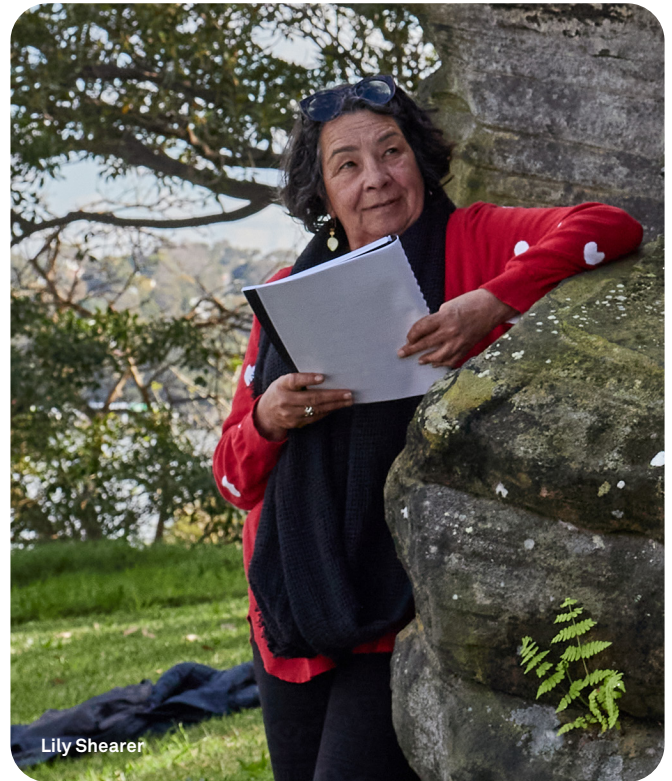
areas. Regarding the use of language in the text, Moogahlin have collaborated with Corina Norman and Jordan Ryan-Hennessey, allowing for a deep investigation into which language groups would be appropriate to translate some of the text into. Originally Jane drew from The Sydney Language Dictionary by Jakelin Troy (1993). For this production language has been drawn from the Bidjigal dialect, recognising that this clan sits within the Eora Nation and Dharug language group. It's also important to note, however, that Bidjigal people also align with the Dharawal language group to the south.

In keeping with Moogahlin's values we have employed First Peoples associate artists to work closely alongside lead artists in production. Shana O'Brien is the Associate Artist working with Lead Designer Elizabeth Gadsby, Amy Flannery is composing with Brendon Boney on sound design, and Moogahlin's Senior Associate Artist Liza-Mare Syron is working with Wesley Enoch as the Associate Director.

In outlining these cultural arts approaches to making First Peoples' stories for the stage, we at Moogahlin aim to honour our practices and 'ways of being' that have existed for thousands of years. We honour our ancestors, whose experiences and knowledge of these practices have been handed down from generation to generation. We also pay attention to our languages, that are closely related to each country and place from which they derive, and finally we value place, where the story is situated, by fully immersing ourselves, cast, crew and partners, hosting site visits to areas of significance in the script. We are grateful to Tribal Warrior Association for our Sydney Harbour cruise and visit to Goat Island, and to Uncle Vic Simms for our walking tour of La Perouse. In aligning cultural values to artistic processes in all our work through collective collaboration, we acknowledge that as individuals we also hold knowledge and individual gifts that have been provided to us by our Ancestors.

Finally, the company would like to pay our respects to the descendants from the countries mentioned in the play, who continue to live on their traditional homelands in this present time.

Lily Shearer and Liza-Mare Syron
Moogahlin Co-founders



Lily Shearer

THE ELEMENTS OF PRODUCTION



The Visitors is anchored in the beauty, power, and dynamism of First Peoples relationships with the Land, ancestors, and each other as it renegotiates colonial narratives about the 26 January 1788.

In the Final Design Presentation for *The Visitors*, Set and Costume Designer Elizabeth Gadsby located the vision for the production in the importance of creating place for the actors and the audience – that of Gadigal Land – and more specifically, Tubowgule, or Sydney Cove.

Tubowgule/Sydney Cove is at the heart of *The Visitors*. The play, set on the Land of the Gadigal on the 26 January 1788, is the day that everything changed for Australia's First Peoples – a day that is rarely examined from the perspective of those who were already living and thriving there.

SET DESIGN

Set Designer Elizabeth Gadsby and Associate Designer Shana O'Brien have envisioned an abstracted, heightened representation of Tubowgule/Sydney Cove so that *The Visitors* is located in the ancient connection to Land, ancestors, language, and culture.

Designers Gadsby and O'Brien have immersed themselves in the specific realities of Watson's Bay, on the southern side of the entry to Sydney Harbour (South Head) to imagine the Land before invasion. Watson's Bay has a predominance of sandstone escarpments and cliffs, impacted upon by the weather and shaping the colour, tone, line, and shapes of the formations that exist there. The carving action of the wind, rain and salt has left the sandstone rocks with unique patterns and gradations of colour, richly abstracted by Gadsby and O'Brien to represent the reality of the cliff formations, with the deeper colours toward the bottom and the lighter colours toward the top, closest to the sun.

Playwright Jane Harrison was inspired by *Twelve Angry Men*, a play that explores the judicial system through the characters found in a small city jury in America. Similarly, *The Visitors* explores the imagined philosophical discussions that may have been explored by the Gadigal as they watched the arrival of the First Fleet, through the lens of ancient cultural protocols, deeply rooted in the relationship to Land and the teachings of the ancestors. One of the key features of the set is the large rock in the centre, representing the "boardroom table" upon which the Elders gather to discuss the arrival of the First Fleet and their individual responses to it. The table is created with the natural colours of the sandstone of the area and reflects the gradations created by thousands of years of weathering, symbolising the profound connection between lore and Land.

Additionally, the central rock is designed to be walked upon by all actors in the ensemble and is the key set piece for the final image of the production in which all the "board members" stand together, deeply connected to the Land, lore and the spiritual world as the British invasion begins.



SET DESIGN (cont.)

The opening moments of the production involve the protocols of meeting, acknowledging, welcoming, and sharing of food together before the business of the meeting can begin.

JAKY: We starting the formal stuff already? Mii ganu wagulgu. We've all come a long way. 'Cept Gordo.

GORDON: Yeah, tuck in. Badangi, gadyan, dyarra marrang gadyan, bibii. Maana dhiyi mulinawul. Tuck in fellas.

They eat.

(The Visitors pg. 3)

The shells referenced in the extract have been made by Quandamooka artist Megan Cope and are discarded downstage stage right. The midden is a visual representation of 65,000 years of the presence of First Peoples and is a tangible record of ownership and connection.

The types of shells used in the midden and by the actors have been sourced from script references in consultation with Cultural Liaison Aunty Yvonne Simms and are the shell grit found at La Perouse.



Guy Simon



Joseph Wunujaka Althouse



Joseph Wunujaka Althouse, Beau Dean Riley Smith, Guy Simon, Luke Carroll, Kyle Morrison and Elaine Crombie

SET DESIGN (cont.)

Set Designer Elizabeth Gadsby and Associate Designer Shana O'Brien have also included a concave 8x10 metre cloth draped throughout the space to create depth and shape. Again, the colours and textures of the material reflect the gradient colours of the rocks at Watson's Bay. The iron elements of the rocks inform the deeper colours at the bottom of the cloth, to the honeycomb colour at the top where the iron has leached out and faded over time. The inclusion of Australian flowers on the rock is suggestive of the intentional nature of the meeting of the Elders, offering a sense of importance and status to the proceedings.

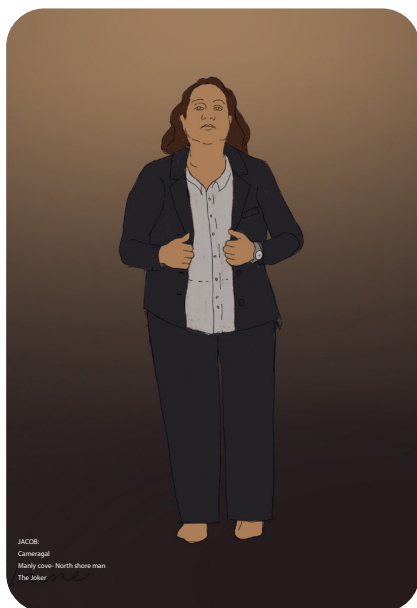
Toward the end of the production, backlighting reveals the artwork and engravings incorporated on the cloth, allowing the call to Country and ancestors in the final heart-breaking welcome where the audience experiences the shifts in space and time as the spirits glow. The engravings are specific to the area and were chosen by Cultural Liaison Aunty Yvonne Simms, sourced from the 1809 document, Aboriginal Carvings of Port Jackson, and Broken Bay.



COSTUME DESIGN

Elizabeth Gadsby's costume design sketches.

From left to right, top to bottom, costume sketches for the characters: Gary, Lawrence, Gordon, Albert, Jacky, Walter and Joseph.



COSTUME DESIGN (cont.)

Costume Designer Elizabeth Gadsby and Associate Designer Shana O'Brien have followed playwright Jane Harrison's vision for the characters, which specifies that all characters are dressed in suits – contemporary corporate attire that represents status, agency, and an understanding of the nuances of law. Each of the suits is in grey scale, designed to represent uniformity and has the structured shape of corporate attire and reinforcing archetypal characterisation.

Seven Aboriginal Elders. Although it is 1788, they wear fine modern suits, and the props are modern. They bring spears and shields with them.
(The Visitors)

The lining of each jacket is individually designed to represent the clan group of each character. Additionally, each character has a traditional adornment worn with their suit to represent each clan group.

The penultimate moment of the production in which the characters call to Country and ancestors is marked by the shedding of the corporate jackets and their uniform shape to move into more traditional images of First Peoples clothing and silhouettes. The suit jackets, turned inside out, clearly show the images that Associate Designer Shana O'Brien has designed, and screen printed onto the lining. Their reveal at the conclusion of *The Visitors* grounds the audience's understanding of the power of connection to the Land.

The design of shields and spears held by each of the characters in *The Visitors* was based on the work of William Dawes, who left written records of the coastal shield markings of the Sydney Basin and the clans of the Parramatta River. It is important to note that because the shields and spears are theatrical props and not used in Ceremony, Cultural Liaison Aunty Yvonne Simms provided permission for their construction to be made by the STC Props Department from modern materials. This includes acrylic paint and non-traditional materials.



Shana O'Brien's lining design sketches



Beau Dean Riley Smith, Luke Carroll, Guy Simon, Kyle Morrison and Dalara Williams



Elaine Crombie, Joseph Wunujaka Althouse, Guy Simon, Beau Dean Riley Smith, Luke Carroll, Kyle Morrison and Dalara Williams

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Production images are courtesy of Daniel Boud

Compiled by **Kelly Young**.

The activities and resources contained in this document are designed for educators as the starting point for developing more comprehensive lessons for this production. Kelly is the Education Manager for the Sydney Theatre Company. You can contact Kelly on **kyoung@sydneytheatre.com.au**

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