

SYDNEY THEATRE COMPANY PRESENTS

# AFTER DINNER

BY ANDREW BOVELL

SYDNEY  
THEATRE  
CO  
EDUCATION



# ONE GUE

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABOUT <i>ON CUE</i> AND STC	3	CHARACTER ANALYSIS	14
CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS	4	THEMES AND IDEAS	17
CAST AND CREATIVES	5	THE ELEMENTS OF DRAMA	20
ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT	6	STYLE	23
FROM THE DIRECTOR	8	BIBLIOGRAPHY	26
ABOUT THE PLAY	9		
SYNOPSIS	10		
CONTEXT	12		

Compiled by Hannah Brown.

The activities and resources contained in this document are designed for educators as the starting point for developing more comprehensive lessons for this production. Hannah Brown is the Education Projects Officers for the Sydney Theatre Company. You can contact Hannah on [hbrown@sydneytheatre.com.au](mailto:hbrown@sydneytheatre.com.au)

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# ABOUT *ON CUE* AND STC

## ABOUT ON CUE

In 2014, STC Ed is developing a new suite of resources located on our website to enrich and strengthen teaching and learning surrounding the plays in the STC season. Each show will be accompanied by an On Cue e-publication which will feature all the essential information for teachers and students, such as curriculum links, information about the playwright, synopsis, character analysis, thematic analysis and suggested learning experiences. For more in-depth digital resources surrounding the ELEMENTS OF DRAMA, DRAMATIC FORMS, STYLES, CONVENTIONS and TECHNIQUES, visit the STC Ed page on our website.

Such resources include:

- videos
- design sketchbooks
- worksheets
- posters

## ABOUT SYDNEY THEATRE COMPANY

In 1980, STC's first Artistic Director Richard Wherrett defined STC's mission as to provide "first class theatrical entertainment for the people of Sydney – theatre that is grand, vulgar, intelligent, challenging and fun."

Almost 35 years later, under the leadership of Artistic Director Andrew Upton, that ethos still rings true. STC offers a diverse program of distinctive theatre of vision and scale at its harbourside home venue, The Wharf; Sydney Theatre at Walsh Bay; and Sydney Opera House, as its resident theatre company.

STC has a proud heritage as a creative hub and incubator for Australian theatre and theatre makers, developing and producing eclectic Australian works, interpretations of classic repertoire and great international writing. STC strives to create theatre experiences that reflect Sydney's distinctive personality and engage audiences.

Strongly committed to engagement in the community, STC's Education and Communities programs aim to inspire theatre appreciation and participation not only in theatres but also in schools, community halls; wherever people get together. STC offers an innovative School Drama™ program; partners with groups in metropolitan Sydney, regional centres and rural areas; and reaches

beyond NSW with touring productions throughout Australia. Through these partnerships and initiatives, STC plays a part in ensuring a creative, forward-thinking and sociable future by engaging with young people, students and teachers.

The theatre careers of many of Australia's internationally renowned artists have been launched and fostered at STC, including Mel Gibson, Judy Davis, Hugo Weaving, Geoffrey Rush, Toni Collette, Rose Byrne, Benedict Andrews and Cate Blanchett.

STC often collaborates with international artists and companies and, in recent years, the company's international profile has grown significantly with productions touring extensively to great acclaim.

STC is assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, by its arts funding and advisory body, and by the New South Wales Government through Arts NSW.

[sydneytheatre.com.au](http://sydneytheatre.com.au)

# CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

## FOR *AFTER DINNER* AND THE EDUCATION RESOURCES

### SUITABLE FOR

Students in Years 10 to 12

### SUBJECTS

Drama

### DRAMA STAGE 5

Outcome 5.3.1  
Outcome 5.3.2  
Outcome 5.3.3

### DRAMA STAGE (HSC PRELIMINARY)

Outcome P3.1  
Outcome P3.2  
Outcome P3.3  
Outcome P3.4

### DRAMA STAGE 6 (HSC)

Outcome H3.1  
Outcome H3.2  
Outcome H3.3  
Outcome H3.4  
Outcome H3.5



Helen Thomson, Anita Hegh, Josh McConville and Glenn Hazeldine in rehearsal for STC's *After Dinner*, 2015. Image: Grant Sparkes-Carroll. ©

SYDNEY THEATRE COMPANY PRESENTS

# AFTER DINNER

BY ANDREW BOVELL

GORDON  
GLENN HAZELDINE

PAULA  
ANITA HEGH

DYMPIE  
REBECCA MASSEY

STEPHEN  
JOSH MCCONVILLE

MONIKA  
HELEN THOMSON

DIRECTOR  
IMARA SAVAGE

DESIGNER  
ALICIA CLEMENTS

LIGHTING DESIGNER  
VERITY HAMPSON

COMPOSER & SOUND DESIGNER  
STEVE FRANCIS

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR  
PHILLIP ROUSE

VOICE & TEXT COACH  
CHARMIAN GRADWELL

PRODUCTION MANAGER  
TERRI RICHARDS

STAGE MANAGER  
SARAH SMITH

ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER  
ROXZAN BOWES

BACKSTAGE WARDROBE AND WIGS  
DAVID JENNINGS

THEATRE TECHNICIAN  
CAMERON MENZIES

REHEARSAL PHOTOGRAPHER  
GRANT  
SPARKES-CARROLL

PRODUCTION PHOTOGRAPHER  
BRETT BOARDMAN

1 HOUR 45 MINUTES, INCLUDING INTERVAL. THIS PRODUCTION PREMIERED AT WHARF I THEATRE ON 20 JANUARY 2015.



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# FROM THE PLAYWRIGHT

## A FATHER'S SECRETS BY ANDREW BOVELL

AS PART OF HIS KEYNOTE ADDRESS AT THE 2014 NATIONAL PLAY FESTIVAL, ANDREW BOVELL RECOUNTED WATCHING THE FIRST PRODUCTION OF *AFTER DINNER WITH HIS FATHER*.

My Dad's name was Peter. Most knew him as Pete. He stood on the station platform waving me goodbye. I was leaving the town I had grown up in and was moving to Melbourne to become a playwright. His eyes misted up as he shook my hand. No kiss. No embrace. That wasn't the way then. But he was crying. I had never seen him cry before. I didn't quite know what to say, so I lied and said, "Don't worry. I'll be back soon." He took me at my word and waited patiently for my return. He reassured himself that this "writing-caper" would be over soon and that I would come home and get a real job. Better not to have such big dreams, he thought. Then you won't be disappointed. Three years later, when I had still not returned, he got on a plane to find out what was going on. His visit worried me. I was no longer the boy I was three years ago. Or at least I was trying not to be that boy.

There were parts of my life that my father wouldn't approve of. But also, I am ashamed to say there were parts of my life

that wouldn't approve of him. His visit coincided with the production of a play. It was a black comedy called *After Dinner* about five lonely and sexually frustrated people looking for a good time on a Friday night out and not finding it. My father and I had never talked about sex. We had settled into that comfortable position that fathers and their sons often do of avoiding the subject. This play, however, talked a great deal about sex and in the most graphic terms. At one point, one of the characters described how her husband woke her in the morning by jabbing his erection into her back. She would lie there with her eyes closed pretending to be asleep until she felt the wet spurt of his ejaculation soa through her nightgown. And that was their sex life. It was a fairly tragic account of marital intimacy but, in the context of the play, was also quite funny.

You can't help but reveal yourself when you write a play. Not the biographical detail of your life, I should point out, but, in writing, you reveal how you see the world. The young man revealed as the writer of this play was not the son my father knew and I just wasn't sure how he would respond to this version of me. I was sitting beside him and my eyes slid sideways trying to see the expression on his face. It was contorted. I thought he was in pain and then I realised he was trying his best not to laugh but in the end couldn't help himself. It's a great joy to cause a theatre full of people to laugh, even more so when one of those people

# FROM THE PLAYWRIGHT (cont.)

## A FATHER'S SECRETS BY ANDREW BOVELL

is your father. I introduced him to the actors and some friends after the show. Being theatre people they all kissed him and hugged him and congratulated him as if he had written the play himself. I even heard him say to someone "He must have got his sense of humour from me." My father was glowing with pride and I love those friends who made him feel so special that night for being the father of the playwright.

One of the actors in the play was my girlfriend at the time. Eugenia Fragos. Actually, she is still my girlfriend. But now we have three children together and a lot more history but, then, our relationship was fairly new. As the three of us walked home from the theatre that night through the streets of St Kilda, Dad told us that he and Mum had sex before they were married. Several times. Perhaps it was the cheap wine after the show or the sexual frankness of the play that had loosened him and prompted this confession, but I felt so gentle toward him, so protective of him at that moment thinking that this was probably the greatest transgression of his life. Perhaps. Who knows their father's secrets really?

We had given him our bed in the house that we shared and we slept on a mattress on the floor in the lounge room. As I made him comfortable and said goodnight and turned off the light he said, "I think you might have something... with this writing caper." "Thanks Dad," I replied. "I suppose this means that you won't be coming home." "No, I don't think so." "Your mother will be disappointed but she'll get used to it." I knew that my mother had well

and truly come to terms with my absence. It was him that was disappointed. That was the way he expressed emotion. Mum was his proxy.

As it turned out, the first play of mine that my father saw was also the last. He did that thing that fathers do to their children. He died before I really got to know him, leaving me with so many unanswered questions. I was too young then and too self-absorbed to know that I even needed to ask them. Since then, I have stood in airport terminals and bus stations and watched my own children leave for other cities and other lives. And now I know exactly how my father felt on that day of our first parting and I'm hoping that I don't die before my children are ready to ask their questions of me.

Sydney Theatre Company (2015). *After Dinner*, Program. Wharf One Theatre, Sydney Theatre Company.

# FROM THE DIRECTOR

## FROM DIRECTOR IMARA SAVAGE

My first encounters with Andrew Bovell's writing were through his iconic film work – *Strictly Ballroom*, *Head On* and *Lantana*. I later saw productions of *When the Rain Stops Falling*, *Speaking in Tongues* and of course his adaptation of *The Secret River*. I knew Bovell as a writer of insight into the turbulent lives of ordinary people. Formally inventive. Mysterious. Gripping. Dark. Surreal.

*After Dinner* was written when Andrew was just 21 years old and, on a first reading, it felt like a radical departure from the maturity of these later works. On the surface, it is a benign comedy of manners. The small pre-occupations of a group of suburban singles on a Friday night out, placed squarely under the microscope. The characters feel larger than life. And so does the hair. And the shoulder pads. But scratch the surface and we find a deep and timeless yearning for human connection, and the trauma that comes from the lack of it.

It confounded me that someone so young could have so much insight into middleaged preoccupations: loneliness, failed relationships, grief, sexual neuroses, the longing for children. The work also seemed to have something of the existential about it. Characters waiting for something to happen. Waiting for life to happen – to them. The joy of this work is in watching our own insecurities and neuroses reflected back to us. The social rituals that give way to social horrors. The show becomes an act of self-recognition

in both the trivial and the profound. The self-imposed boundaries of the bistro area and strict rules of social gathering reflect the boundaries we create for ourselves. The unseen dance floor comes to represent the sexy unknown, adventure... life. Get amongst it, the music urges. We connect with this odd group because we've all been there. On a Friday night. Lonely. In a crowded pub. And so we cringe and uh-huh and share in their confusion and awkwardness and anxiety and humour. It is a deep, dark, moving, hilarious, gauche and beautifully observed period piece from a time when we were all a bit less knowing. It is a 30-year-old play, firmly set in the 80s in this country. It is also the first play of one of our most important playwrights. Its wit and humanity have made it an enduring gem in our theatrical canon.

Sydney Theatre Company (2015). *After Dinner*, Program. Wharf One Theatre, Sydney Theatre Company.



Designer Alicia Clements and Director Imara Savage in rehearsal for STC's *After Dinner*, 2015. Image: Grant Sparkes-Carroll. ©



FOR QUICK FACTS ON THE SHOW CHECK OUT OUR  
PRE-SHOW IN-THE-KNOW FACT SHEET!



# ABOUT THE PLAY

## THEY JUST WANT TO DANCE WITH SOMEBODY.

*After Dinner* is a poignant and hilarious collision of lonely hearts, sex, friendship and Friday night drinks. A suburban pub, circa 1987. Paula, Monika and Dympie are going to paint the town red... or maybe just a deep shade of embarrassment.

Paula's frocked up, it's Monika's first night out in years and Dympie just wants a table with a good view of the band. Semi-eligible blokes Gordon and Stephen are shaking off the office and revealing their own peccadillos while they're at it. Between the Chardonnay, the oysters and the odd Valium things are bound to loosen up!

Playwright Andrew Bovell (*The Secret River*, *Lantana*) is one of Australia's finest writers. In *After Dinner*, his first play from 1988, he exhibits the sure hand of a gifted wordsmith. His beautifully observed characters and wincingly funny one-liners reveal the timeless trials of friendship and singledom, as well as being a delicious reminder of the less than timeless trials of perms and skinny ties that were the 1980s.

Featuring the comedic talents of Helen Thomson (*Mrs Warren's Profession*), Josh McConville (*Noises Off*), Anita Hegh (*The Secret River*), Glenn Hazeldine (*Perplex*) and Rebecca Massey (*Vere (Faith)*).

In this comedic gem, some will relive memories. Many will be reminded of friends and lovers. You'll all know the music... And a few might even recognise a little bit of you.



Anita Hegh and Rebecca Massey in STC's *After Dinner*, 2015. Image: Brett Boardman ©

# SYNOPSIS

## ACT ONE

Act One is set in a suburban pub-bistro on a Friday night in the reserved area for meals. Dympie enters and after careful deliberation, chooses a suitable table for her and her friends who will join her shortly. She is watched by Gordon who is sitting alone, also awaiting the arrival of friends. When Paula enters, there is a terse discussion because Dympie wants to sit at the back of the bistro and have a quiet meal, while Paula wants to sit closer to the band. Dympie's excuses hide her social anxiety and awkwardness. Once the women sit down, Dympie asks Paula for the stockings she has bought for her and Paula tries to convince Dympie to wear a different colour and size. Dympie tries to have Paula pass her the stockings without Gordon at the next table seeing. For Dympie it would be highly embarrassing for a man to see a woman's pantyhose! Paula and Dympie discuss how to handle their friend Monika who will be joining them on her first social outing since her husband passed away. When Monika arrives the three women awkwardly make small talk trying to ensure that everyone is happy. This eventually leads to a series of unintentional insults. Dympie obsesses over small decisions such as who should go to the bathroom when and with whom, what wine to have and what food to order. Her need to control these situations shows her desire for companionship and her fear of loneliness. It is clear that the three women are a mismatched collection of friends.

Stephen arrives and greets Gordon who he has not met before. Gordon is rather slow on the uptake towards

Stephen's witty jokes. Their awkward conversation about watches and the bistro shows that Stephen is apprehensive about spending the evening in the company of Gordon as they are clearly not alike. Stephen offers to buy Gordon a drink. Not an avid drinker, Gordon settles for one beer.

The women discuss the menu and Dympie barks at Paula to get the attention of the waiter and tensions between the women begin to flare. Monika starts to cry, finding the expectations of the evening all too much. Monika becomes hysterical and Gordon tries to offer his assistance which results in Dympie snapping at him that everything is under control. Dympie orders Paula to slap Monika and when Paula refuses, Dympie slaps Paula instead. Monika, shocked by the situation, immediately calms down. Monika apologises and begins to tell the story of how Martin had his stroke. Monika goes to the bathroom. Unsympathetic and thinking only of her stomach, Dympie leaves to retrieve her from the bathroom so they can order. Paula introduces herself to Gordon and apologies for Dympie snapping at him earlier. The two make light of the fact that there are "three of you and three of us." When Dympie returns from the bathroom it is noticeable that Dympie is now wearing make-up similar to Paula's. Paula exits to try and retrieve Monika from the bathroom and Dympie begins talking to Gordon.

Stephen returns with the drinks and Gordon fills him in on what has been happening while he was at the bar.

Fancying himself as a womaniser, he approaches Dympie's table and introduces himself. He then tells Gordon that once Brendon arrives they will make a move on the three women. Gordon begins to talk about his feelings and how lost he has felt since his wife left him. Stephen mistakes Gordon for a homosexual and the conversation turns awkward. Meanwhile, Monika has gone missing from the bathroom. Undeterred, Dympie orders Paula to forget about it and order some dinner.

Gordon goes to order another round of drinks and bumps in to Monika who is no longer looking immaculately groomed. Disheveled, she coerces Gordon into buying her, "Dympie" and Paula another round of drinks. It becomes apparent she has taken Valium and is drunk. She has been on an adventure throughout the pub, behaving outrageously. Monika talks about going swimming in the 'pool' with lots of faces peering down at her. When a billiard ball drops out of her handbag, it is clear she has been 'swimming' on the pool table. Monika begins to admire men's bottoms in the bistro. The conversation becomes crass as Monika tells all the sordid sexual details of her marriage much to the disgust of Dympie and amusement of Paula. Despite being recently widowed, Monika is more sexually experienced and free compared to the other women and this in part causes the tension. Act One ends with Monika trying to pull Paula up to dance, while Dympie pulls her towards the table, resulting in the women, Gordon and Stephen all on the floor.

# SYNOPSIS (cont.)

## ACT TWO

Act Two takes place later in the evening after dinner. The three women are at their table and Monika is more composed. Paula has a dollop of cream on her face that Dympie is fixated on. Stephen and Gordon are on another round of drinks and eagerly watching the movements of the women, occasionally exchanging comments. Stephen confesses his sexual inadequacies despite bragging about being quite cavalier, while Gordon confesses his physical insecurities surrounding his wife leaving him. The men then proceed to use this information against each other throughout the end of the evening.

The bill is delivered to the table and the three women discuss how best to pay. This turns in to a very technical discussion about who ate what and how much each woman should contribute to the bill. The men also engage in a discussion surrounding paying the bill by cash or card. The band starts and everyone awkwardly bops around in their seats. Monika and Stephen get up and dance. While they are dancing, Paula continues a conversation with Gordon. She is also under the misapprehension that he is gay and that is the reason his marriage ended. Once the misunderstanding is resolved they get up and dance.

Dympie is left alone at the table and yells at the people in front of her to move so she can see. When the people ignore her, she stands up on table and shouts to Paula that she can finally see. At this point the music stops and everyone turns to look at Dympie, who then declares that she is the "...plainest and loneliest woman in the world."

(Pg. 61) A slow song begins and Paula, feeling sorry for Dympie, asks Gordon to dance with Dympie, leaving Paula to happily dance on her own. The play ends with Stephen and Monika going home together and the others on the dance floor.



Josh McConville and Glenn Halzeldine in rehearsal for STC's *After Dinner*, 2015. Image: Grant Sparkes-Carroll. ©

# CONTEXT

## AUSTRALIA IN THE 1980S

THE 1980S. KNOWN FOR POWER SUITS, BIG ROMANTIC BALLADS (TAKE IT AWAY PAT BENATAR!) AND BUM BAGS. BUT THAT'S NOT ALL. UNDERNEATH THE BLUE EYE SHADOW, SHOULDER PADS AND BIG PERMS WAS A SOCIETY THAT HAD DEPARTED FROM THE PEACE AND FREE LOVE OF THE 1970S AND WAS FACING A RAPIDLY CHANGING WORLD WHERE THE HAIR WAS BIG AND SO WERE THE ISSUES.

### HIV/AIDS

HIV reached epidemic proportions across the world in the 1980s. Between 1983 and 1985 HIV spread rapidly and infected 5000 Australians. The majority of people affected were gay men in inner city Sydney and Melbourne. The first reported death from AIDS in Australia was in 1983, however Australian health organisations swiftly responded to the pandemic setting up disease prevention and public health programs. A controversial advertising campaign was broadcast on TV in 1987. The ad featured the grim reaper rolling a bowling ball towards a group of people acting as the pins. The ad campaign aimed to educate people about HIV/AIDS and how everyone was at risk and an epidemic could be imminent.

The AIDS pandemic made dating and sex cautious territory compared to the free love of the 60s and 70s. This is portrayed by Paula in Act Two when she is talking to Gordon and mistakes him for being gay. She comments "It's a lot safer now to do it with women. [...] You're more likely to catch AIDS, aren't you? Being homosexual." (Pg. 60)

### CORPORATE POWER AND GREED

The 1980s are synonymous with greed. Gordon Gekko in *Wall Street* used the famous line "greed is good" while Madonna was singing about being a "material girl". The 1980s became known as the decade of greed as capitalist governments experienced prosperity with low unemployment and stock market investment at an all time high.

This fostered luxurious spending in Western nations. With this opulence came greed and Australians witnessed the first major case of corporate bankruptcy and fugitive businessmen that also became synonymous with the 80s. Christopher Skase was a businessman who through overzealous spending and high interest loans found himself in \$700 million worth of debt. He fled Australia to escape creditors, creating the 12 year "chase for Skase" across the globe trying to get him to return to Australia. Skase was never captured and died in 2001.

# CONTEXT(Cont.)

## AUSTRALIA IN THE 1980S

### POWER DRESSING

The corporate power and greed of the 1980s is echoed through 'power dressing' worn by some of the characters in *After Dinner*. The fashion helped to elevate status with large shoulder pads and big, powerful shapes. The sleeves on Paula's dress were large and puffy with the frilly layers of her ra-ra skirt sticking out. Stephen's suit had sharp angles and exaggerated his broad shoulders and chest. In contrast, the costumes of Gordon and Dympie do not echo power dressing, showing their lower status as characters.

### EATING OUT

In the 1980s, eating out was becoming more popular in a move away from home cooked meals of "meat and three veg." Bovell captures the changing cuisine in his satirical dialogue between characters when they are choosing a meal. Monika considers having the chicken cacciatore and wonders what prosciutto is. The women also have an in-depth discussion about rocket and the fact that salads no longer necessarily contain lettuce.

### YUPPIES

Yuppie comes from the abbreviation YUP - Young Urban Professional. A Yuppie is a young, middle class professional who has a well paid job and a luxurious lifestyle. The economic prosperity of the 1980s saw the evolution of the world's first Yuppies. Yuppies have all the latest gadgets, are fashionable, know all the trendy places to go and food to eat and drink. Stephen can be considered a Yuppie as he waves around his gold American Express card and boasts about no longer using cash and always paying by credit card - "Honestly Gordon, you should update your thinking. If you want to get anywhere these days you can't afford to be running back and forth to the ATM. Frankly, with the company I keep, I'd be embarrassed to show anyone I still used cash." (Pg. 56) Gordon's wife Jane, can also be considered a Yuppie. Gordon talks of her ambition when working with Challenge and going out all night drinking cocktails.



Rebecca Massey and Anita Hegh in STC's *After Dinner*, 2015. Image: Brett Boardman. ©

# CHARACTER ANALYSIS

## DYMPIE

Dympie is a plain and conservative single woman. She is a creature of habit, always wanting to sit towards the back of the bistro despite the fact they can't see the band. Dympie is rather frumpy and unfashionable. She wears average sized bone coloured stockings, which are symbolic of her ordinary and old fashioned character – “But I only wear bone. Average and bone.” (Pg. 4) The stockings are too big for her and bunch around her ankles, making her appearance frumpy. Paula tries to encourage “Dumpie Dympie” to be more fashionable in the hope of attracting men by buying her sheer black stockings in a smaller size but Dympie maintains that “the sort of man that judges you on your stockings is not the sort of man I want to spend the rest of my life with...” (Pg. 4)

Dympie is deeply controlling, desperately insecure and terrified of change – from the type of make-up she wears to where she sits in the bistro. These feelings cause moments throughout the evening to quickly become tense. Such as pre-planning the event of someone going to the bathroom and deciding that they should always go in pairs because “it's nice to go with someone else.” (Pg. 10) Similarly, paying the bill becomes very technical and Dympie decides “...we can each pay for our own main, divide the cost of the carafe by three and halve the garlic bread.” (Pg. 54)

As the play progresses it become clear that Dympie has no self-confidence and makes herself feel better by belittling

Paula and bossing her around. She accuses Paula of being bulimic saying “Then you're bulimic. It all amounts to the same thing. You stuff it in then you can't wait to get it out.” (Pg. 9) Dympie also shows little sympathy towards Monika who has lost her husband. When Monika runs crying to the bathroom she goes to find her simply because she is hungry and wants to order dinner.

At the end of the play Dympie is reduced to a sad, lonely state. Fed up with her behavior, Paula tells Dympie that the only reason she is her friend is because “There's not another woman at the office who can even bear to be in the same room as you.” (Pg. 58) Following this, Dympie acknowledges her frumpiness and propensity for loneliness by standing up on the table while everyone is dancing and yelling “...and I'm the plainest and loneliest woman in the world.” (Pg.63)



Rebecca Massey in STC's *After Dinner*, 2015. Image: Brett Boardman. ©

# CHARACTER ANALYSIS (cont.)

## PAULA

Single and fashion forward Paula arrives at the bistro wanting to sit closer to the band so she can dance, however Dympie won't let her. Paula is wearing an interesting dress with a hood and quite loud, garish make-up. Paula is eager to have a good night with her two workmates and tries to make everyone feel happy and comfortable. She admires Monika and looks up to her as she has had a husband and a home. Unfortunately she has a tendency to either put her foot in her mouth or say comments that are slightly misplaced. When trying to assure Monika about her future without her husband she says, "You're a beautiful rose. Just at the moment, you're covered in aphids." (Pg.12) She is always the one to defuse situations throughout the evening, in particular, going to retrieve Monika from the bathrooms.

She is kind, and despite Dympie's disparaging comments and constantly bossing her around, at the end of the play Paula organizes for Dympie to dance with Gordon in a bid for her to feel less lonely.

## MONIKA

Monika is the most elegant of the three women and more experienced, having been married. Monika's husband Martin has just passed away from a stroke and this is her first night out since his death. At the beginning of the play, Monika admits she is finding it hard as her entire life revolved around Martin. "It's been so long since I've been out. I mean I've been out but it's been so long since I've been out like this...like..." (Pg. 7) Her grief coupled with the tense atmosphere generated by Dympie results in Monika crying in the bathroom and the two friends unable to find her. When Monika re-appears she is disheveled after taking Valium, drinking committing a series of confused and adventurous acts in the bar area. Monika then goes into great detail about the unhappiness of her marriage to Martin which leads Dympie to label her grief as

fake. She craves excitement with a man after years of monotony. "I've always been a bit of a homebody myself. Martin...that's my husband...Martin was quite content to stay at home." (Pg. 9) She then resolves to be free and fulfill her desires saying "It's not too late. I'm a beautiful rose about to bloom. And watch out when I do because I'm going to...I'm going to find myself a man. Any man. I don't care." (Pg. 43) At the end of the evening, Monika leaves with Stephen to pursue her dreams of freedom and passion.

## STEPHEN

Stephen and Gordon have been invited to the pub by their mutual friend Brendon. However, Brendon never arrives. Stephen is quite masculine and is a stereotypical Australian male who likes a drink and goes to the pub to pick up women. He fancies himself quite the womaniser; however it is revealed later in the play that despite talking himself up, he feels sexually inadequate and has never had a long term relationship. Throughout the evening he makes conversation with the three women and tries to help them in a bid to make a good impression.

At first, Stephen is unsure how to react to Gordon who is more attuned to his emotions and openly talks about his feelings. He grows tired of Gordon speaking about his ex-wife and says "But I didn't come here to talk. Brendon didn't say anything about talking or crying. I came here to chase a bit of skirt and to have a good time. I didn't come here to talk and express my emotions with my fellow man!" (Pg. 32) Stephen is fiercely protective of his masculinity which is why he has an inability to communicate on a less than superficial level. This is particularly poignant, as his character desires meaningful connection and love from a woman. At the end of the play Stephen's differences with Gordon lead them to a falling out and they insult each other with snide comments. The evening ends with Stephen going home with Monika and Gordon telling him to "...give my regards to Mrs Hazelmere" (Pg. 63) a reference to his lack of ability in the bedroom.

# CHARACTER ANALYSIS (cont.)

## GORDON

Gordon, in a show of character, sits patiently waiting for his friends to arrive in the bistro for over an hour. Gordon is a socially awkward, conservative and sensitive man who has come to the pub hoping to talk to some men about his wife leaving him. Gordon and his wife have separated as he was unable to satisfy her and she became successful in his career and discovered a new life of cocktails and parties. He is grieving and looking to talk about his feelings – “You need to tell someone you have been crushed. You need to shout before you go mad, before you hurt someone...” (Pg. 31) His desire to talk about his feelings leads Stephen and later Paula to assume he is gay.

Gordon is behind the times and rather daggy, wearing a brown suit and a shirt with a geometric green pattern. He is behind on current trends about quartz digital watches and the use of credit cards. Gordon spends a lot of the play waiting and feeling uncomfortable which is a reflection of his conservative and polite nature towards others. This is seen when he speaks to the women by offering assistance and making small talk. However, when Stephen humiliates him his fuse breaks and he retaliates by insulting Stephen using the information he told him in confidence. The play ends with Gordon on the dance floor with Dympie.



Josh McConville and Glenn Hazeldine in STC's *After Dinner*, 2015. Image: Brett Boardman. ©



# THEMES AND IDEAS

## FRIENDSHIP

The characters in *After Dinner* have unlikely friendships which become more complex across the course of the evening. At the beginning of the play it is apparent that Dympie, Paula and Monika are three very different women. Paula is slightly fashion forward and more confident, Dympie is conservative and controlling and Monika is a grieving widow, desperate for adventure. Across the bistro are Gordon and Stephen who are also polar opposites. Gordon is attuned to his emotions while Stephen is a stereotypical Australian male out for a night 'chasing skirt.'

As the events of the evening unfold the friendships begin to fall apart as they become intolerant of each other's differences. The character's behavior towards one another reveals that their relationship does not have the qualities of a friendship and instead they are perhaps friends through circumstance. This is encapsulated when Dympie fails to tell Paula that she has cream on her face and Paula in retaliation tells Dympie what people really think of her. Paula begins to make amends by asking Gordon to dance with Dympie at the end of the play as Dympie and Paul realise they need each other's company and friendship.

Gordon and Stephen also clash and use the secrets they have divulged to one another as ammunition for insults. In the final moment of the play Gordon tells Stephen "Give my regards to Mrs Hazelmeyer" (Pg. 65) This sarcastic comment reminds Stephen that although he may be taking Monika home, he won't be able to please her.



Anita Hegh and Rebecca Massey in STC's *After Dinner*, 2015. Image: Brett Boardman. ©

# THEMES AND IDEAS (cont.)

## LOVE, RELATIONSHIPS AND LONELINESS

In an article about the play, Andrew Bovell described the moment when he was inspired to write *After Dinner*. “It was Friday night at the Tankerville Arms on Nicholson Street in Fitzroy. As we arrived, we had to walk through the bistro section of the pub and I noticed three women at a table. [...] They were in their mid-30’s and, probably unfairly, I had a sense that life – or rather love – had passed them by.” (Bovell, 2015) Bovell goes on to describe *After Dinner* as “...a play about fear and loneliness and love, or lack of love.” (Bovell, 2015)

The characters in *After Dinner* all exude a sense of loneliness which becomes apparent as the play progresses. Their loneliness is stemmed from being single and their previous dysfunctional and loveless relationships. Monika’s marriage was passionless and unexciting, creating a sense of loneliness. While the death of her husband leaves her grieving, her new found freedom gives her the adventure she craves. Dympie combats her loneliness with her controlling attitude and spiteful comments towards the more confident Paula. She lets her guard down in the final act when she openly calls herself lonely.

Stephen shows bravado towards women, however it is revealed he has never had anything more than a one night stand and his boasting hides his deep seated desire to be married. “I know I’m always saying that marriage isn’t for me but it’s a lie Gordon. That’s exactly what I do want.” (Pg. 50) In the end, the suburban bistro on a Friday evening provides the perfect setting for the five 30- something’s to combat their fears and loneliness.

*After Dinner* is also about the disappointment of love and relationships, which is experienced by the characters. It is this disappointment that has led them to the pub on a Friday night. Gordon and Monika have both been disappointed by their marriages. Stephen is disappointed by women who only stay with him for one night and Dympie and Paula have been disappointed by their inability to find love in general. There is a sense that this disappointment will continue after the play is over as Stephen and Monika go home together but

neither will get what they want from the experience. Monika wants a passionate night, which Stephen won’t deliver and Stephen wants meaningful connection, which is not what Monika is looking for.

Love and relationships are about making a connection; for the characters in *After Dinner* it is more about missed connections. Throughout the play the characters reach out to each other but don’t understand what the others want and need.



Anita Hegh, Rebecca Massey and Helen Thomson, in STC’s *After Dinner*, 2015. Image: Brett Boardman. ©

# THEMES AND IDEAS (cont.)

## EXISTENTIALISM AND SOCIAL RITUALS

The first production of *After Dinner* was entitled *Dinner and Then Entertainment* and was a one act existential piece. However, as the play evolved from the original student production at the Victoria College of Arts (VCA) where Bovell was studying, the play changed to *After Dinner* - a comedy of manners. However hints of the existential roots still remain. *After Dinner* director Imara Savage says that “...the work also seemed to have something of the existential about it. Characters waiting for something to happen. Waiting for life to happen – to them.” (Sydney Theatre Company program, 2015) As the characters wait in a suburban pub on a Friday night, the events of the evening and their encounters with one another turn their lives in a subtle new direction. Dympie has a moment where she feels wanted and gets the human connection she craves, even if it is fabricated by a sympathetic Paula. While Monika thinks the wait is over as she embarks on a raucous night with Stephen, however the audience know she will be disappointed.

Comic moments in the play are drawn from the fussing surrounding social rituals. Social rituals that take place without thought, such as paying the bill, choosing from the menu or going to the bathroom at dinner are placed under the microscope by Bovell. For the characters in the play these social rituals, give way to social horrors as they are intricately picked over. While these moments are comedic, audience members may cringe at having had similar experiences with friends.



Image: Grant Sparkes-Carroll. ©

# THE ELEMENTS OF DRAMA

## CHARACTER

Role and Character are two different elements. Role is one-dimensional and involves representing a point of view and identifying with a particular set of values and beliefs. Character is the complex personality and background of a Character. A Character's complexity is portrayed through interaction and relationships with others and through voice and movement choices.

### TAKE YOUR CUE

- How have the three actors portrayed Dympie, Paula and Monika's personalities by manipulating voice, language, movement and body language?
- How have the actors portrayed Gordon and Stephen's personalities through voice, movement and language?
- How would you describe the relationship between the three women? What specific moments in the play lead you to this decision?
- What does space, body language and vocal tone tell us about the relationship between Gordon and Stephen? How does this relationship change across the course of the play and how is this shown?
- How do the costumes reflect the personalities of the characters who are wearing them?

## TENSION

Tension is the force that drives all drama and moves the Dramatic Action forward. Tension strengthens Audience Engagement as it motivates the audience to continue watching while influencing them to question the ideas in the play. The prevailing Tension of the play is for the characters to all obtain the connection they crave and combat their deep-seated loneliness. However, their different personalities and personal problems disturb these plans creating tension between one another.

### TAKE YOUR CUE

- Map the major Tension across the course of the play. How does the Tension build, how is it made more complex by different events and how is it resolved?
- What causes the Tension between Dympie and Paula? How is this shown?
- What causes the Tension between Gordon and Stephen at first? How is this resolved?



Josh McConville in STC's *After Dinner*, 2015. Image: Brett Boardman. ©

# THE ELEMENTS OF DRAMA (cont.)

## PLACE AND TIME

All Dramatic Action occurs in Time and Place. Time refers to the period in which the Dramatic Action occurs. Time affects the place and situation that the characters find themselves in. Certain settings will intensify the action while multiple locations can help build the Dramatic Tension.

*After Dinner* is an Australian classic firmly set in 1980s suburban Australia. There is fun in the nostalgia of this play for 2015 audiences as the characters and the bistro setting are instantly recognizable to audience members who lived through the 80s. The character relationships and the concept of love and loneliness are timeless while the sexual and gender politics are a reflection of 1980s Australia.

In the play the three women sit diligently at the table waiting for men to approach them, rather than mingling. This was a time without mobile phones, Facebook and Tinder afterall! The traditional view of the man as the provider is also explored when Gordon speaks about his wife having a more successful career than him, which caused tension in their relationship and resulted in her leaving him. This is seen in the line “And then she was snapped up by Challenge. That’s when the trouble started. Onward and upward with The Challenge. What she always called her job suddenly became her career.” (Pg. 36)

## MOOD/ATMOSPHERE

Atmosphere is the feeling or mood that is created by, and emerges through, Dramatic Action. Mood and Atmosphere are closely linked to Tension. As the tension builds so too does the Atmosphere. The creation of an effective Atmosphere fosters Audience Engagement.

### TAKE YOUR CUE

- Research 1980s décor. Discuss in a small group how you would design your version of the bistro. Include colours, furniture and lay out.
- In groups, design the living room for the home of each of the characters. Include colours, furniture, ornaments etc. that are reflective of both the 1980s and the style of the characters.
- What are some quintessential 1980s items you can find in Alicia Clements’ set and costume design?

### TAKE YOUR CUE

- What is the Atmosphere at the beginning compared to the end of the play? What causes this change?
- Describe the Atmosphere when Monika takes Valium in the bathroom. How is this Atmosphere created through voice, language, movement and space?
- Describe the Atmosphere when Paula mistakes Gordon for being gay. How is this Atmosphere created through voice, movement and body language?

# THE ELEMENTS OF DRAMA (cont.)

## MOVEMENT

Movement expresses action and, like language, is dictated by situations, roles and relationships. It can be realistic or abstract. Director Imara Savage says that *After Dinner* has minimal Movement as much of the dialogue is centred around the tables of the bistro. However, this allows the emphasis to be on the dialogue, making the audience really think about why the characters say their particular lines.

### TAKE YOUR CUE

- The Movement in *After Dinner* is confined to the tables. What effect does this have on you as audience members?
- What type of Movement is used by the actors when they are sitting at the tables? How does this add to the Atmosphere?
- The actors have placed an emphasis on making their lines vocally interesting. What is a moment in the play where a character was particularly vocally interesting (using voice modulation such as pitch, pace, volume, tone) creating Comedy?
- How would you describe Monika's voice by comparison to Dympie's voice?

## DRAMATIC MEANING

Dramatic Meaning is created through the Elements of Drama that are interrelated and interdependent. Dramatic Meaning is what is communicated between the performers, the world of the play and the audience. Dramatic Meaning is always open to interpretation and there is never one set meaning in a production.

### TAKE YOUR CUE

- Consider the themes of *After Dinner*. Devise a statement of Dramatic Meaning from these themes.
- Are you as audience members made to feel sorry for any of the characters? When? Why? Do you think this was Andrew Bovell's intention?
- Which character encapsulates the idea of loneliness the most and why? Are there any choices by the actor playing the role that emphasise this?
- Which moment in the play best portrays the friendship between the three women?



Helen Thomson in STC's *After Dinner*, 2015. Image: Brett Boardman. ©

# STYLE

AFTER DINNER IS A MIXTURE OF MANY DIFFERENT STYLES. THE CHARACTERS, EVENTS AND STYLE OF ACTING CREATE THE STYLE OF HEIGHTENED REALISM. THE PLAY ALSO HAS MOMENTS OF COMEDY OF MANNERS AND BLACK COMEDY WITH EXISTENTIAL UNDERTONES. TOGETHER THESE STYLES CREATE AN AUSTRALIAN CLASSIC.

## HEIGHTENED REALISM

While the play, its characters and story have their roots in reality, events and characters are slightly exaggerated and the play is performed in an over the top manner creating Heightened Realism. As the events of the evening go from bad to worse, the structure of *After Dinner* builds to a climax at the end of Act One when they all end up on the floor. The performances by the cast such as Rebecca Massey (Dympie) and Josh McConville (Stephen) are exaggerated through the voice modulation (pitch, pace, tone, volume), and their body language and facial expression choices. Josh McConville's entrance as Stephen demonstrates this beautifully as he enters with his chest puffed out, shoulders back and with a swarve facial expression. Rebecca Massey adjusts her glasses, smooths down her dress and has perfected a strong glare to show Dympie's frumpy and controlling character.



CHECK OUT THE POSTER FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT ANDREW BOVELL'S WRITING FOR STAGE AND SCREEN!



Anita Hegh in STC's *After Dinner*, 2015. Image: Brett Boardman. ©

# STYLE (cont.)

## COMEDY OF MANNERS

Comedy of Manners is the satirical portrayal of behaviour in group social situations and *After Dinner* fits this description brilliantly. Throughout the play there are moments that are awkward and anxious where the characters often “put their foot in it” creating laughs as the audience have all been in that moment at some point in their life. An example of this is when Monika arrives and Dympie and Paula are trying hard to make her feel special after her husband’s death, however it does not go as intended.

**Paula:** A little tired though.

**Dympie:** Don’t be ridiculous Paula. Monika doesn’t look tired.

**Paula:** No, just a little.

**Dympie:** Monika looks the best she’s looked for a long time. Your make-up, lovely... lovely.

**Dympie:** And you’ve lost weight. She’s lost weight, hasn’t she Paula?

**Paula:** Since when?

**Monika:** I haven’t really.

**Dympie:** Of course you have. Around the face. She’s lost it around the face. Tell her she’s lost it around the face Paula.

**Paula:** You mean since we saw her at work this afternoon?

**Dympie:** No of course not. Since before that. Since the last time... you know what I mean. You know what I mean, don’t you Monika? (Pg. 8)

Bovell’s dialogue is witty and uses analogies that are intended by the characters to be poetic and serious and are instead comical. For example, Paula describes Monika as “... a beautiful rose. Just at the moment, you’re covered in aphids.”[...]”All you need is some tender care, for an old friendly gardener to come along and spray you a little.”(Pg. 12)

Bovell has also incorporated moments of satire about suburban middle class Australia which predate those from *Kath and Kim*. For example, Dympie describes Paula as a chameleon, pronouncing it ‘sham-el-on.’ Similarly, Gordon discusses how he and his ex-wife Jane met while working at the Commonwealth Bank, but when she moved to Challenge the fridge became full of Chardonnay.

## BLACK COMEDY

The audience laugh in *After Dinner*, however there is also something tragic about the characters and their situations. The Black Comedy is a direct result of the existential undertones of the production about five loveless people in a suburban bistro on a Friday night. As the climax of the play builds, the characters become less composed and the sad and sordid details of their lives begin to play out. As described by Bovell “the humour takes us on a journey so that we might in the end feel compassion for the human frailty.” (*What I Wrote*, 2002)

At first the audience laugh as the characters reveal the dark truths of their lives. However, underneath the Comedy is something deeper and darker. Bovell describes the women dividing the bill in the Tankerfield Arms 30 years ago as “both funny and tragic.” (Bovell, 2015) Director Imara Savage describes the Black Comedy of the play in saying “... scratch the surface and we find a deep and timeless yearning for human connection, and the trauma that comes from the lack of it.” (Sydney Theatre Company Program, 2015)



# STYLE (cont.)

## COSTUMES AND SET

The set and costumes are designed by Alicia Clements. The bistro and clothes are instantly recognizable as from the 1980s. The costumes consist of long pleated skirts, blouses with puffy sleeves, soft bows and shoulder pads. While Gordon and Stephen are dressed in shirts and vests in the colours and patterns of the era. Glenn Hazeldine, who plays Gordon, has even grown a moustache!

Clements has said that as the designer she was wary of pushing the 1980s design too far. Although the design has been heightened theatrically there is an awareness that the people and issues are real. Rather than the comedy coming from sending up the era, the comedy needs to come from the characters and their situations, not from laughing at their over the top outfits and hair!



Image: Grant Sparkes-Carroll. ©

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## OTHER RESOURCES AVAILABLE FOR *AFTER DINNER*

- Pre-Show In-the-Know handout for fast facts and what to look for in the performance.
- Classroom poster and handout about the writing of Andrew Bovell