

Sydney Theatre Company and Medina Apartment Hotels present

TROUPERS

by Michael Cove



Teacher's Resource Kit

written and compiled by Jeffrey Dawson

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following for their invaluable material for these Teachers' Notes: Iain Sinclair, Assistant Director, *Troupers* for his Concordance; Laura Scrivano, Publications Manager, STC

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**Troupers
Important Information
Schools Day Performance**

Date: Wednesday February 2007

Venue: Wharf 1, Walsh Bay

Pre-performance forum 10.30am

Lunch Break 11.15am

Performance commences: 12.15pm

There will be one interval.

Performance concludes: 2.45pm

Post performance Q+A concludes 3.00pm

We respectfully ask that you discuss theatre etiquette with your students prior to coming to the performance.

Booking Queries

Please contact Barbara Vickery on 02 9250 1778 or bvickery@sydneytheatre.com.au

General Education Queries

Please contact Helen Hristofski, Education Manager, on 02 9250 1726 or hristofski@sydneytheatre.com.au

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Sydney Theatre Company

Sydney Theatre Company (STC) produces theatre of the highest standard that consistently illuminates, entertains and challenges. It is committed to the engagement between the imagination of its artists and its audiences, to the development of the art form of theatre, and to excellence in all its endeavours.

STC has been a major force in Australian drama since its establishment in 1978. It was created by the New South Wales Government, following the demise of the Old Tote Theatre Company. The original intention was to better utilise the Drama Theatre of the Sydney Opera House and the new Company comprised a small central administration staff, technical staff, workshop and rehearsal facilities. Richard Wherrett was appointed Artistic Director from 1979 to 1990.

The Wharf opened on 13 December, 1984 by Premier Neville Wran, which allowed all departments of the Company to be housed under one roof for the first time. The venue was to become the envy of the theatre world. From 1985, the Company could perform in two locations throughout the year, the Drama Theatre and The Wharf. From 1990 to 1999, Wayne Harrison served as Artistic Director. A third regular venue, Sydney Theatre, administered and operated by STC, opened in 2004.

The predominant financial commitment to STC is made by its audience. Of this audience, the Company's subscribers make a crucial commitment. The Company is also assisted annually by grants from the Federal Government through the Australia Council and the New South Wales Government through the Ministry for the Arts. STC also actively seeks sponsorship and donations from the corporate sector and from private individuals.

Under the leadership Artistic Director Robyn Nevin, STC's annual subscription season features up to 12 plays including: recent or new Australian works, interpretations of theatrical classics and contemporary foreign works. In addition STC regularly co-produces and tours productions throughout Australia, playing annually to audiences in excess of 300,000. STC actively fosters relationships and collaborations with international artists and companies. In 2006 STC began a new journey of artistic development with the inception of The Actors Company, the STC ensemble.

To access detailed information on Sydney Theatre Company, its history and productions please contact our Archivist Judith Seeff at jseeff@sydneytheatre.com.au

Sydney Theatre Company Education

Sydney Theatre Company is committed to education by programming original **productions** and workshops that enthuse and engage the next generation of theatre-goers.

Within the education programme Sydney Theatre Company produces its own season of plays as well as collaborates with leading theatre-for-young-people companies across Australia.

Often a young person's first experience of theatre is facilitated by teachers. STC ensures access to its mainstage productions through the **Schoolsday** programme as well as produces and tours theatre specifically crafted to resonate with young people.

STC works to support educators in their Drama and English-teaching practices.

Every year dynamic **workshops** are held by leading theatre practitioners to support curriculum content, detailed resources are provided for all productions and an extensive work-experience programme is available to students from across the state.

The annual Sydney Morning Herald and Sydney Theatre Company **Young Playwright's Award** continues to develop and encourage young writers. The winning students receive a cash prize and a two-day workshop with a professional director, dramaturg and cast – an invaluable opportunity and experience.

Sydney Theatre Company has an extensive **on-line resource** for teachers and students. Visit www.sydneytheatre.com.au/education.

We encourage teachers to subscribe to regular e-news to keep informed as well as access **heavily discounted** tickets and special offers.

For further information on STC Education programme, please contact the Education Manager Helen Hristofski at hristofski@sydneytheatre.com.au

Cast and Production Team

Sydney Theatre Company and Medina Apartment Hotels present

Troupers

By Michael Cove

Cast

ISAAC

ELSIE

WALTER

THERESA

TOFFEE/ALFRED/BAKER/CLERGYMAN

LIL/PAULINE/MAISIE/JUDITH/APRIL

JOAN/LANDLADY/PASSENGER

HORACE/DONALD/DAWSON/PRIEST/SOLDIER

COMPERE/INSPECTOR

BARRY OTTO

BLAZEY BEST

JOSH QUONG TART

NATASHA WANGANEEN

RYAN HAYWARD

ALEXIS FISHMAN

TONI SCANLAN

ARKY MICHAEL

BEN FINK

Production Team

DIRECTOR

DESIGNER

LIGHTING DESIGNER

SOUND DESIGNER AND COMPOSER

MUSICAL DIRECTOR

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR

CHOREOGRAPHER

VIDEO ARTIST

JEAN-PIERRE MIGNON

CHRISTINA SMITH

NICK SCHLIEPER

PAUL CHARLIER

BEN FINK

IAIN SINCLAIR

GAVIN ROBINS

SCOTT OTTO ANDERSON

The Playwright: Michael Cove

Overview of the Writer & Context

Sending Off the Troops

By Gemma O'Donoghue in *Currents*, STC's Subscriber Magazine, Vol.24, No.4, December 2006

*A "wright" is a type of artisan who makes things that people can use. Just as a wheelwright makes wheels, a playwright makes plays. The play text is used by other artists such as actors, directors and designers who participate in the final realisation of the play on the stage. Michael Cove is the playwright of **Troupers** and provided the blueprint for Director Jean-Pierre Mignon for rehearsals.*

"If you finish your novel, your job is done, if you write for performance when you finish your script the job has just started, you haven't finished anything, you have just kicked something off," says Michael Cove, writer of *Troupers*, the new Australian play that kicks off Sydney Theatre Company's 2007 season with an unexpected journey into bereavement, survival and the afterlife, populated with music hall tunes and unique moments of humour and pathos.

Troupers takes us back to Australia in the aftermath of the First World War, where we meet two music hall performers, Isaac and Elsie, who travel the country living off their songs, wit and little else. When the duo comes across Theresa, an enigmatic and beautiful black woman, they see an opportunity to spice up their act and make some considerable cash. What they do not foresee is Theresa's actual ability to fulfil their implausible promises to their audiences. And that spells trouble.

When Michael Cove began his career in the theatre and film industry did not initially consider writing as a career option. Still today, he is unsure about what it is exactly that draws him to theatre. Despite growing up in London he did not go to the theatre until he was 16, seeing Ben Jonson's *Volpone* at The Old Vic on a school excursion. After studying at film school he began working as a film technician where he learnt what was entailed in being a director and an actor and "sussed" that he would be "fairly disastrous" in those areas.

He developed a broad interest in performance and realised that writing could be a way of "engaging with the business". In the early stages of his career he wrote in his spare time and on holidays until he finally had a play produced, *Dazzled*, at the Australian Theatre in Newtown. By this time he had moved from London to Australia with his wife and has been based here ever since.

Michael has had a long and varied career writing for film, television and radio, but one might suspect that it is theatre for which he has a particular soft spot. When asked to compare writing for the different mediums he replies in the history of performance it is the stage that is the medium and that when writing for radio, film or television you are "transforming the traditions of theatre". Of particular interest for Michael is the "peculiar" relationship that takes place between the audience and live performance, a unique and ancient contract. Theatre, he recognises, denies certain opportunities but affords others. In short, he surmounts that - "a good story will always work on stage – you can tell the story of the charge of the light brigade, you just can't show the charge".

Troupers is in part the indirect result of a long standing interest Michael has in the First World War. In his reading on the subject one particular phenomenon that caused him "to pause and reflect on its meaning" was the enormous upsurge in spiritualism. He observes that this was particularly true in Australia as none of the 65,000 young Australians that died were buried in their country of birth. For their grieving families there was an acute and unending sense of loss and bereavement, especially as there was no funeral to be had, no grave to visit. People were desperate to give meaning to the loss of so many young lives and to have the opportunity to say goodbye.

Although his interest in the upsurge of spiritualism post World War One in Australia was a trigger to the creation of this play, it was only one of many different and varied ideas that came together to create this new piece of work.

"Writing a play is a mixture of thoughts, ideas, imagination and trying to make something theatrical," he says. Writing is not a necessarily conscious process for Michael, rather, and as it was *Troupers*, it could be a story, or a character, or perhaps just an idea for an opening line that starts the process. "Writing is at its best when you feel like a stenographer, just going as fast as you can to keep up with these people, and what you are doing is writing down everything they are saying and doing," he muses.

In *Troupers*, a handful of marginalised characters with hidden pasts take centre stage. Michael observes that, although it has not been a conscious decision, marginalised characters are recurrent not only in *Troupers* but in his body of work. There is a certain amount of empathy he feels towards these characters that makes him "give them the good lines". He comments that these are unlikely characters to take us into a story that covers ideas around loss, disillusionment and the distance between the myth and reality. Unlikely characters, but by no means dislikeable. Michael recalls that one of the reasons he was driven to write *Troupers* was the simple joy in writing about these characters, of "going back to the desk to find out what they were up to".

Michael is reluctant to discuss what he sees as the subtext of *Troupers*, namely because the process of writing for him is not issue driven. He also acknowledges that other people's interpretation of the play are no less warranted than his own – "I don't want to diminish the work's opportunity by telling people what they should think". However, he does contextualise the play by recognising that the world we live in, at this moment, and the political commitments that Australia has made "are not without a certain resonance to the situation that we were in 1914-1918". He also anchors the play in a theatrical tradition of telling stories about a past event, not to give a history lesson but rather to give the audience some distance to think about the ideas and themes that emerge from the story. "There is an endless tradition of audiences thinking about stories of either what has been or what never could be and drawing inferences and considering their positions and making contemporary parallels," Michael says.

Essentially, what he would like the audience to take away from *Troupers* is, quite simply, an enjoyable and satisfying theatrical experience. He has always believed it is an "unforgivable sin" to waste the two hours that the audience has given you. "It is the principle responsibility of the playwright to make sure those two hours are well spent," Michael says. He casually adds that "if they would like to spend the next two weeks arguing about it [the play] then that is just the cherry on my cake".

Examples of WWI memorials in NSW

Ulladulla, Bathurst, Cooma, Condobolin, Double Bay, Gilgandra and Turramurra



The



Research Notes by Ian Sinclair, Assistant Director,

Soubrette:

The term "soubrette" originated to name a sort of character in French comedy. It describes a comic female character who is young and girlish, constantly flirtatious, coquettish and gossipy, and usually a chambermaid.

Such characters appear in commedia dell'arte scenarios, often in the role of Columbina, where the actress would provide the details of her behavior and dialogue. From there, she moved to the works of Molière, known to be influenced by commedia; the role of Dorine in Tartuffe certainly fits the description. A more famous example, though a hundred years later, is the role of Suzanne in Beaumarchais' Le Mariage de Figaro.

Come Love's Sweet Song
Love's Old Sweet Song
Music by J.L. Molloy;
words by G. Clifton Bingham

This is one of the most frequently referred to and significant musical allusions throughout Ulysses. Molly Bloom will be singing this song on her concert tour with Blazes Boylan and, indeed, the afternoon liaison between her and Blazes is ostensibly for the purpose of rehearsing the music for that concert, including this song. Bloom learns that the song will be included in the concert tour early in the morning, and it serves throughout his day and the novel Ulysses both as a leitmotif of Molly's adultery and as the theme song of her potential reconciliation with Bloom

Song Lyrics

*Once in the dear dead days beyond recall,
When on the world the mists began to fall,
Out of the dreams that rose in happy thong
Low to our hearts Love sang an old sweet song;
And in the dusk where fell the firelight gleam,
Softly it wove itself into our dream.*

*Just a song a twilight, when the lights are low,
And the flick'ring shadows softly come and go,
Tho' the heart be weary, sad the day and long,
Still to us at twilight comes Love's old song,
comes Love's old sweet song.*

*Even today we hear Love's song of yore,
Deep in our hearts it dwells forevermore.
Footsteps may falter, weary grow the way,
Still we can hear it at the close of day.
So till the end, when life's dim shadows fall,
Love will be found the sweetest song of all.*

*Just a song a twilight, when the lights are low,
And the flick'ring shadows softly come and go,
Tho' the heart be weary, sad the day and long,*

*Still to us at twilight comes Love's old song,
comes Love's old sweet song.*

"If You Were the Only Girl (in the World)" is a popular song.

The music was written by Nat D. Ayer, the lyrics by Clifford Grey. The song was published in 1916. It was republished in 1946. The song has become a standard, recorded by many artists.

Edward Elgar called it the most perfect tune ever. It was introduced on 19 April 1916 at the premiere of the musical/revue The Bing Boys Are Here at The Alhambra, Leicester Square, sung as a duet between the original stars, George Robey as Lucius Bing and Violet Loraine as Emma.

Lyrics

*Sometimes when I feel low
and things look blue
I wish a boy I had... say one like you.
Someone within my heart to build a throne
Someone who'd never part, to call my own*

*If you were the only girl in the world
and I were the only boy
Nothing else would matter in the world today
We could go on loving in the same old way*

*A garden of Eden just made for two
With nothing to mar our joy
I would say such wonderful things to you
There would be such wonderful things to do
If you were the only girl in the world
and I were the only boy.*

Derryville is a small town in County Tipperary Ireland. However in this play it is a fictional town in country NSW

A Shickse is a non Jewish woman

COLD READING

Cold reading is a technique used by salespeople, interrogators, hypnotists, fraudulent psychics and spiritual mediums, graphologists, palmists, applied kinesiologists, astrologers, shamans, faith healers, witch doctors, tarot-card readers, and conmen in order to convince another person that they know much more about them than they actually do.

Even without prior knowledge of a given person, a cold reader could still quickly obtain a great deal of information about his subject by carefully analyzing his or her

body language, clothing or fashion, hairstyle, gender, sexual orientation, religion, race or ethnicity, education level, manner of speech, place of origin, etc.. This is called profiling. Occasionally, cold reading is not intended to defraud or deceive. Former New Age practitioner Karla McLaren said, "I didn't understand that I had long used a form of cold reading in my own work! I was never taught cold reading and I never intended to defraud anyone; I simply picked up the technique through cultural osmosis." For more see the rehearsal notes on Psychics.

Waiting at the Church

Melody - Henry E. Pether, 1906
Fred W. Leigh

*I'm in a nice bit of trouble, I confess;
Somebody with me has had a game.
I should by now be a proud and happy bride,
But I've still got to keep my single name.
I was proposed to by Obadiah Binks
In a very gentlemanly way;
Lent him all my money
So that he could buy a home,
And punctually at twelve o'clock to-day-*

*Chorus:
There was I, waiting at the church,
Waiting at the church, waiting at the church;
When I found he'd left me in the lurch.
Lor, how it did upset me!
All at once, he sent me round a note
Here's the very note, this is what he wrote:
"Can't get away to marry you today,
My wife, won't let me!"*

*Lor, what a fuss Obadiah made of me
When he used to take me in the park!
He used to squeeze me till I was black and blue,
When he kissed me he used to leave a mark.
Each time he met me he treated me to port,
Took me now and then to see the play;
Understand me rightly,
When I say he treated me,
It wasn't him but me that used to pay.*

*Just think how disappointed I must feel,
I'll be off me crumpet very soon.
I've lost my husband - the one I never had!
And I dreamed so about the honeymoon.
I'm looking out for another Obadiah,
I've already bought the wedding ring,
There's all my little fal-the-riddles
Packed up in my box
Yes, absolutely two of ev'rything.*

Director: Jean-Pierre Mignon

After reading the playwright's script, the director decides on an overall vision for the production. The director meets with the creative team to achieve a unified look for the sets, costumes, lighting, sound and other elements. The director oversees the actors in rehearsal, often with the help of an assistant director and always with stage managers.

Jean-Pierre Mignon was renowned for his inventive re-telling of French classics at Anthill Theatre Company in Melbourne in the 1990s, as well as innovative productions of Australian plays such as *The Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, returns to theatre to direct *Troupers* for Sydney Theatre Company, where he has previously directed *The Misanthrope*, *The Miser* and *The Bourgeois Gentleman*.

Miserly Machinations

by Laura Scrivano, *Currents* Vol.20 No.3 Aug 2004

Originally trained in France, Jean-Pierre spent 10 years working in theatre there, before starting Anthill Theatre in Melbourne in 1980, a venture that enabled him to inventively produce both classic and contemporary plays.

"Anthill was the vehicle to new readings of the classics, like Chekhov, Ibsen, Shakespeare and also producing contemporary plays but always with the intention to challenge. Our ambition was to have theatre of quality and we were recognised internationally for that." says Jean-Pierre.

Since the end of Anthill in 1995, Jean-Pierre has established himself as a film and TV director.

"The difference between directing a classic and something contemporary lies very much in acting style," says Jean-Pierre. "For a classic you need to find an actor with a particular range. With stage we are talking about something that is more hyper realistic - for me, it's about bursting out and going beyond what we so often see on our theatre stages."

Pushing the theatrical boundaries is something that Jean-Pierre is passionate about, maintaining that theatre should be a daring exploration for both the artist and the audience.

"I would love to see theatre that is more challenging, spiritual and far more daring. It is not an easy thing to do because there are audiences that are complacent and just like to be entertained but for me theatre is a specific medium that can have a wonderful reach when it works," he says.

Jean-Pierre hopes to delight and provoke his audience.

The Actor: Barry Otto

“Why do I need to get up on stage and be an exhibitionist?”

Interview with Joyce Morgan, in *Spectrum*, *Sydney Morning Herald*,
Weekend Edition January 26-28 2007

The twisted tales and fragmented dialogue of Michael Cove's play seem a perfect fit for Otto. It is set in the aftermath of World War One, when a generation of young Australian men had left for European battlefields, never to return. They left behind fractured families and parents mourning lost sons, seeking a way to ease their grief.

"Those boys had no idea of the nightmare they were headed for," Otto says. "The terror, the noise, noises going off all the time, the confusion, the sudden panic ... they died within seconds, some of them, or they lie dying in the mud, twisted trees everywhere."

As he slips from past to present tense and into anxious staccato phrases, it's as if the glittering harbour has receded where he sits nursing a coffee and he sees the slaughter unfolding before him.

Otto plays Isaac, an East End Jewish entertainer who has washed up in Australia and joined forces with a brash young woman Elsie Montes to sing, dance and scam their way around country towns.

The Actor: Josh Quong Tart

“He Said What?”

Interview with Katrina Lobley, in *Metro*, *Sydney Morning Herald*,
25 January 2007

Josh Quong Tart is nothing if not charming. The actor rocks up to Sydney Theatre Company HQ 10 minutes late, full of smiles and apologies. He says, disarmingly, that he considered telling a lie about why he's late.

Without stopping for breath, he says his car was almost out of petrol and that he had to stop to fill up or he might not have made it here at all. No one is sure if that's the truth but it doesn't matter. Quong Tart is forgiven, just like that.

Perhaps it's no coincidence that Quong Tart is playing a good-looking charmer who mixes fact and fiction.

It's 1919 and the odd couple is doing the rounds of country towns, entertaining families who are mourning their sons lost at war. Amid the grief, Isaac is inspired to turn Elsie into a psychic who channels the fallen soldiers. Only problem is she's not very good at it. Their fortunes change when they meet Theresa (Natasha Wanganeen from *Rabbit Proof Fence*), an Aboriginal woman with an eerie gift for making contact with the other side.

Theresa joins the Isaac-and-Elsie road show and starts conducting séances that hit home so hard that the troupe is quickly moved on from town to town.

Enter Walter, Quong Tart's character, who knows a meal ticket when he sees one. Walter says he's the local school teacher but he's not quite who he says he is, particularly when he snatches Theresa from Isaac and Elsie.

The 31-year-old Quong Tart rose to prominence in TV dramas such as *All Saints* and the ill-fated *Headland*. He made his STC debut in Moliere's *The Miser* in 2004.

Quong Tart is also the great-grandson of 19th-century Chinese tea merchant and Sydney bon vivant Mei Quong Tart, who has a statue erected in his honour at Ashfield.

"Some people actually come purely to the show that I'm in just to have a little chit-chat after," he says. "They hang around just to have a chin-wag about [Mei] Quong Tart."

Quong Tart is convinced he landed the best role on *Troupers*.

"He presents himself as one thing but we quickly find out that he's anything but. It's a huge play. The audience are certainly going to be engaged. There are moments of vaudevillian, in-your-face musical theatre but it's not that at all. Really, it's ... what's the word? What's the word when it's very ...? Um. Um. Um. Oh, make it up."

A few days later Quong Tart phones to provide the missing word. Charming, poignant, iconoclastic will all do nicely, he says. "All the characters are just terrific. Being part of a new play is so special."

Musical Direction: Ben Fink

This production of *Troupers* includes songs of the World War One period. Included in the play are: *And the Band Played In*, *The Boy I Love is up in the Gallery*, *Love's Old Sweet Song*, *If You Were the Only Girl in the World*, *Waiting at the Church*, *My Old Dutch*, *A Bird in a Gilded Cage*, *K-K-K-Katy*, *Roses of Picardy* (based around World War One but produced in 1927) and *Australia Will Be There*

Plot Synopsis

To familiarise yourself with the story, read through the play synopsis below. Write down your initial response to the story, which you can reflect back on, after you have seen the play.

It's 1919 and Isaac and Elsie make people laugh.

They've teamed up - unlikely as it is, an old East End Jew and a cheeky young Aussie – to make a quid, but their act is tired.

Isaac has a flash of inspiration: Spiritualism is big business and even better showbiz. When they enlist a young black housemaid, Theresa, as a seer, they reckon her looks are guaranteed to sell tickets. But there is a slight problem. Theresa really does have an unsettling, other-worldly gift. And she can't control it.

Michael Cove's new play is an affectionate, astute and timely look at those who soldier on with the show and those who have to soldier on with life. This is a play about commemoration and the place of war in our history. Through popular song, soft-shoe shuffle and séance we travel across the outback to a new cenotaph and a dedication ceremony destined to make history.

Setting

Troupers is set in 1919/20 in Derryville, a fictional town in country NSW and also at Dunphy's Soak, another country town with grieving townsfolk.

Elsie tells Isaac in the first scene: "We've had the war to end all wars." Horace in the play calls World War One - 1914-1918 – "four years that will go on forever."

Character Summaries

There are over 23 characters in *Troupers*, played by nine actors.

Isaac (Issy) Abrahams

English, Jewish, London East Ender from Whitechapel; quick thinking con man, a survivor. A witty old vaudevillian or entertainer, comes from a music hall background – “he’d been on the halls.” A wanderer. Now a cellar man in an Australian pub in a small country town. Likes telling stories: “They’re life’s way of reminding us to look under the bed.” Suggests to Elsie at the start of the play that they “work-up an act.... Team up, song and a two-step.” They sing corny old songs like “Roll out the Barrel” interspersed with gags like, “My wife’s just got back from India.” “Goa?” “I’ll say she is!”

He is defensive about his past life, such as falling in love at nineteen. He tells Elsie, “Don’t dig... Because when you dig you make a hole. “He had been imprisoned in England in the past on an insurance scam and he has learned from this experience: “Few years deprived of liberty teaches a man how to look another man in the eye.” He quotes Oscar Wilde to Elsie: “We are all in the gutter, some are looking at the stars.”

Like her, he is desperate to scratch out a living in the tough times of the play. In the first scene, Isaac tells Elsie that “people will need to laugh, there’s hard times coming, I can feel it in my water.” He says this despite that “Peace has broken out,” as Elsie informs him. She calls him Ivan at first, which is his stage name. He is a schemer of the first order: Elsie informs us: “We scratched along, singing for our supper and I made no complaints. But Issy. Issy was always sniffing around and one day he picks up a scent. Maybe not everyone wants to forget, maybe there’s more coppers (money) to be made off the ones who want to remember. And that’s when this story starts.” He realises that the grieving families of the country’s 60,000 dead soldiers, lost in WWI, “don’t want to forget. No. They want to be reminded.... The whole country’s wearing an armband.” He tells her he isn’t “soft, but what I am is, I’m a bit, I’m off balance is what I am. I’ve walked all sorts of tightropes,’ but realises he is onto something with his spiritualist show idea. In performance he uses cold reading techniques or mind reading to guess the identity of the audience member’s loved one, telling one of them, “I do like to find the right word as you know.”

Later when Elsie doesn’t feel comfortable in her Madam Eloise role, he has another idea – to use “the girl, chambermaid, maid. (Theresa, the Aboriginal servant) Have you seen her? I looked Elsie and my brain - like the light went on...It’s the difference between her and you, that is what they will pay for.”

Isaac falls in love with Elsie, even though she is young enough to be his daughter. He finds love later in life ‘as his defences get broken down,’ according to actor Barry Otto, who is playing him. Isaac confesses, “I’m an old bloke who has a bit of trouble keeping up with a smashing girl in certain departments and I am well aware of it without ribbing.” To which Elsie replies, “If I’ve learned one thing Isaac it’s that something that can be bought and sold’s never valuable. A cuddle on the other hand, a real ‘I love you’ sort of cuddle, that’s beyond price and you give very good cuddles, Issy.”

Isaac dies of a heart attack just when Elsie ‘nearly had him trained.’ He meets up with Toffee on the spirit side and tells him “What I wanted, when I died, was people to look at me, grab me, turn me upside down , give me a good ruddy shake and when nothing fell out say, “Christ, he didn’t leave a drop.”

Elsie Montes

A con artist, mercenary but not vindictive; has had a hard upbringing and youth, later a stripper and a hooker. Real name – Elsie Hopkinson. First up she tells us she “was never one for jumping in two-footed.” Soon she becomes his “ragtime gal” or song and dance partner, then Madam Eloise, his fake medium offsider. At her wit’s end as an entertainer or “soubrette” touring country towns; is convinced by Isaac to act as a medium in a touring spiritualist show, which eventually affects her emotionally after she has created devastation for some audience members. Like Isaac, she is desperate to scratch out a living in the tough times of the play. She is spritely, cagey and cynical yet has a maternal instinct towards Theresa, the black chambermaid with extrasensory skills who joins their act. Elsie tells us, “an odd looking duet turned into a very peculiar trio.” Elsie is grieving for the parents in the play going through a marriage break up. Sleazy Walter wants Elsie to leave Isaac and go out on the road with him, as he understands her.

Isaac dies of a heart attack just when Elsie ‘nearly had him trained.’ She then returns Theresa to her home town and plans to move to London. Elsie leads the “Elsie Hopkinson Troupe” in a presentation called ‘The Incident at Dunphy’s Soak’ which ends in tragedy at the dedication of the town’s war memorial.

Theresa – an enigmatic and beautiful Indigenous woman; a housemaid, brought up on a mission, sold by her family. Elsie tells the audience “she came from a world of strange things.” Elsie accuses Isaac of wanting to exploit Theresa in their scam as a black woman, but he says it’s because she’s “exotic.” She wants to escape from her past. Acting as a medium in a roadshow provides her with the opportunity to escape from slavery – she’s the slave to Dawson, the licensee, who had bought her from her parents. Elsie assures Theresa that Isaac “won’t lay a finger on you,” unlike Dawson.

Theresa speaks the truth whether others want to hear it or not. She tells Elsie she was sent home from mission school on account of her “touching” or healing skills. Actor Natasha Wanganeen sees her as a ‘weapon’ in the play. Like Isaac and Elsie, she lives outside the society she visits. She really has the spiritual skills that Isaac had hoped she would act out, “a Godsend.” Elsie adds, “whose mute, thoughtless being can become as alive and civilised as you and I when it is possessed by someone with a message from beyond.... She speaks to dead people.”

Theresa is made false offers by Walter so she says that her friend Toffee wants to sort him out – to which Walter threatens “Any more of that you’ll feel the back of my hand.’ Tells her to play act if she can’t summon up spirits. Lures her away from Isaac and Elsie to Sydney. Walter thinks it might be better if Theresa ‘performs’ in front of women-only audiences “because women are soft and you like hearing sappy stuff.’

When Elsie returns Theresa to her home town it leads to the fatal climax of the play at the dedication ceremony of Dunphy’s Soak’s war memorial. She appears to channel Toffee’s disapproval of the so-called tribute and picks up the gunpowder pots that Joan has brought to the ceremony....which leads to the play’s fatal climax.

Walter Patterson – says he’s the local schoolteacher in Dunphy’s Soak but we soon see he has a murky past. He is desperate for respect; does anything to achieve this. A lost soul, wears many masks; shifts dramatically during the play. Tells Isaac that he would spruce up their spiritualist act: “I would propose that with a touch more intelligence, a dab more imagination, you could empty every widow’s pocket, every grieving mother’s purse from here to Port Darwin.” He is no innocent, having experienced the red light district in Cairo. Offers transport out of Dunphy’s Soak to Isaac and his two assistants, “knowing that he had to facilitate them to travel the

country, because they bring an extraordinary gift of solace into hearts that so sorely need it after the great tribulation of 1914 to 1918.” Tells Elsie he understands her as they’re both from the same side of town. Sees Theresa as a money-making proposition, performing séances. He exploits her having her dress made up as the ‘noble savage.’ Elsie calls Walter “Judas” when he is not interested when Theresa returns to the town. In typical mercenary fashion he even wires the local newspaper with news of ‘The Incident at Dunphy’s Soak’ in a cash for payment situation, at the end of the play.

Joan Aldridge – upper middle class woman from England, trapped in a loveless marriage with Horace while suffering enormous grief for her late son, George (Toffee) killed in WWI. She seeks solace in an interior life, but is she really ‘mad’? Tells Horace that “None of us can be ourselves..., that is no longer possible.” Suffers from neurasthenia, according to her husband. Claims to be communicating with her son Toffee at the dedication of Dunphy’s Soak’s war memorial. She takes gunpowder pots to the ceremony concealed in her clothing. She pronounces near the end of the play, “This is not a mother’s monument. It flies flags and brags and our boys do not want a bar of it, they have told me, not a bar of a saluting place that tells the lie till who Toffee was has gone and all we praise is the battle that cut him down.”

Dr Horace Aldridge – from Dunphy’s Soak; stitched up husband of Joan, locked in a loveless marriage. Father of the late, young soldier, George, a.k.a Toffee. Believes that his son died for king and country: “I believed that we could not let old England down in her hour of need for then... there would have been an enfeebled Empire, a broken navy, exposing us to those hordes in the north.” He intends to create a war memorial in the township as a matter of “civic pride”, being president of The Soldiers and Sailors Fathers Association. Considers Isaac, Elsie and Theresa to be “hoaxers... I know a cheap trick when I see one.” Concerned with so-called “decency.”

Toffee – the ghost of a young soldier, George, finally at peace in the spirit world. Son of Joan and Horace. Called Toffee by Joan because he was so sweet. Has great compassion for his mother’s situation. He falls in love as a ghost. Like Theresa, Toffee is a truthful character. His spirit speaks through Theresa, which brings about the fatal ending of the play when he disapproves of the town’s new war memorial....

Lil Hawker and Pauline – both young country girls, grieving for their young fiancés.

Alfred – a war veteran from the town of Dalgleish.

Baker – a member of The Soldiers and Sailors Fathers Association of Dunphy’s Soak.

Clergyman – also from Dunphy’s Soak. Thinks that Isaac and his cronies’ act is “shameful... preying on the grief of decent women.”

Judith – maid to Horace and Joan

April – audience member at the trio’s spiritualist show at Dunphy’s Soak

Dawson – the licensee who bought, kept and abused Theresa.

Compere of cabaret that employs Isaac

Technique: direct address to the audience – For example in the first scene Elsie informs us: “We scratched along, singing for our supper and I made no complaints. But Issy. Issy was always sniffing around and one day he picks up a scent. Maybe not everyone wants to forget, maybe there’s more coppers (money) to be made off the ones who want to remember. And that’s when this story starts.”

Glossary

Look over some colloquial, Jewish and other words from Michael Cove’s play and their meanings before you see *Troupers*.

soubrette - a French name describing a comic female character who is young, girlish, constantly flirtatious, coquettish and gossipy – Elsie in *Troupers*. Such a character appears in commedia dell’arte scenarios, often in the role of Columbina.

A yid – a Jew

Shickse – a Jewish word for a non-Jewish woman.

Donkey’s years – slang for a very long time

Kishka – guts, intestines literally and figuratively – “I was so upset, I was eating my kishkas out!”

Farkukter – shitty

Charlatan – a person practising fakery or other confidence tricks in order to make money by false pretences – e.g. Isaac & Elsie in the play.

The Battle of Pozieres – a two week struggle in WWI where many young Australian soldiers were sacrificed.

Ectoplasm dense bio-energy which is claimed to make possible the materialisation of ghosts and psychokinesis – like an aura.

The Wazza – red light district where Australian soldiers were stationed before Gallipoli

Genug iz Genug – Yiddish for ‘enough is enough.’

Broigus – Yiddish for a grand family feud where many family members are not speaking to each other.

Nebbish – an ineffectual, weak-willed or timid person.

On the bugle – smelly; an unpleasant idea or proposition

Kike - a highly derogatory term used to refer to a Jew – highly abusive term.

Filoosh – Arabic term for money

Copper – money

Florin – twenty cents now – also ‘two bob’

A pound – two dollars

China (plate) – Aussie rhyming slang for mate

To go do-lally – to go mad

Mafeesh – Arabic term for finished, not available anymore

Drai mir nit kain kopf – Don't bother me!

Pourvu que le geste soit beau – French for 'provided that the gesture is beautiful.'

Hang out the bunting – literally means 'put the flags and streamers out.'

Ma-alish - Arabic for forget about it

Harley Street Disease – a venereal disease, syphilis; named after London's famous medical district

Le Juif – the Jew

Sit Sheva – Judaism's week long period of grief and mourning for close relatives

Carnies – show people – i.e. folk who work on the carnival circuit

Cat sou – Digger slang for two pence

Billet doux – French for love letter

Schmuck- a jerk or detestable person

Lot's wife – Biblical reference to Lot's wife and the pillar of salt she turned into

Black powder – the original gunpowder

Before seeing the production, explore these questions:

- Research the time of World War I.
- Compare the attitudes toward war and the involvement of young Australian men and women during WWI and 21st Century Australia in Iraq. E.g. Horace opines that “Our sons went (to war) so that you could travel this land freely and if they had not gone, where do you think we would be?” about WWI. “The Empire was threatened by Barbarians.”
- What would you include in the program for a play about two entertainers in country NSW in WWI?
- A portrait of actor Barry Otto taken against a red theatre curtain in role as Isaac, sitting on an old suitcase, features in the publicity campaign for the play. Clip the ad for *Troupers* from the Amusement Section of *The Sydney Morning Herald*?
- What can you tell about the play from this STC poster image of the play?
- What does this ad tell you about the marketing strategy for this production?
- Playbuild around the themes of:
 - Loss
 - disillusionment
 - pretence
 - the distance between the myth and reality.
 - Grief

After seeing the production, explore these questions:

- Having seen *Troupers* can you now see how the poster/press advertisement relates to Mignon's production?
- What expectations did you have before seeing this production? What changed for you after seeing it?
- Can you relate the presentation of séances in the play to the television series *Crossing Over* featuring clairvoyant John Edward?
- Direction – What do you think was the vision of the director and his interpretation of the play. (The role of the director of a theatrical production not only includes finding the best actors for the play, creating truthful and believable performances, and building an effective ensemble, but also defining a particular vision for the text.)
- Design - What mood does the set evoke from the out-set of the play? How does this alter at different times in the production?
- Sketch Christina Smith's set and list all the (minimal) props; e.g. chairs.
- Discuss the impact the character changes had on the audience's experience of the play.
- How did the actors use the space to convey the shifts in character and narrative and time?
- How does lighting contribute to the mood of the scenes? What effect do these lighting states achieve? List some that were used.
- How does music of WWI and other music/ sound design contribute to the production?

Bibliography

MICHAEL COVE'S OTHER PLAYS – Canberra playwright

Kookaburra – entertaining comedy/drama about delinquency and family life in Sydney's industrial western suburbs; performed at Sydney's Nimrod Theatre in 1974.

Family Lore - Jewish mother and father remember the certainties that shaped their own lives and try to come to terms with the realisation that the expectations of parents are not always those of their children.

Also unpublished plays such as *The Gift* (1976), *Fields of Offerings* (1977) *I Suppose I'd Better I Wish I Could Talk to You* (1976 – a youth theatre play) and *Duckling*.

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Breaker Morant

WEB SITES

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Board of Studies
www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au
Here you'll find full information about subject syllabi and past examination papers.