

THE SERPENT'S TEETH
Two plays by Daniel Keene *Citizens* and *Soldiers*

Date: Wednesday 7 May

Venue: Drama Theatre, Sydney Opera House

Suitability: Years 11-12

Pre-performance forum **11.30 am**

Lunch Break 12.15 pm

Performance commences: **1 pm**

Performance concludes: 2.05pm

Post performance Q+A concludes 2.25pm (approx)

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

Running Late?

Please contact Sydney Theatre Company's main switch on 9250 1700 and a message will be passed to Front of House.

Booking Queries

Please contact Marietta Hargreaves on 02 9250 1778 or
mhargreaves@sydneytheatre.com.au

General Education Queries

Please contact Helen Hristofski, Education Manager, on 02 9250 1726 or
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Sydney Theatre Company presents The STC Actors Company in

The Serpent's Teeth

Two plays by Daniel Keene *Citizens & Soldiers*

Directed by Pamela Rabe and Tim Maddock

Teacher's Resource Kit

Written and compiled by Jeffrey Dawson
Edited by Helen Hristofski

Acknowledgements

Sydney Theatre Company would like to thank the following for their invaluable material for these Teachers' Notes: Laura Scrivano, Publications Editor, STC; Deborah Franco, Sales/Marketing Director, Currency Press; Helen Hristofski, Education Manager, STC

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Production Credits

Sydney Theatre Company presents the STC Actors Company in

THE SERPENT'S TEETH

Two plays by Daniel Keene: Citizens and Soldiers

CITIZENS

Rasid – John Gaden

Tariq – Narek Armaganian/Josh Denyer

Basim – Peter Carroll

Hayah/ Inas – Hayley McElhinney

Armaganian/Josh Denyer

Habib – Brandon Burke

Safa - Amber McMahon

Qasim – Eden Falk

Kamil – Ewen Leslie

Yusuf – Luke Mullins

Samirah – Emily Russell

Aziz - Steve Le Marquand

Layla – Marta Dusseldorp

SOLDIERS – A REQUIEM

Tom Lewis - John Gaden

Jim Lewis - Luke Mullins

Sam Lewis - Ewen Leslie

Jack Lewis - Narek

Bill Lewis - Peter Carroll

Robert Holman - Brandon Burke

Martin Holman - Eden Falk

Eve Mellick – Marta Dusseldorp

Helen Simon – Amber McMahon

Catherine Pavic - Pamela Rabe

John Black - Steve Le Marquand

Alice Black – Emily Russell

Emily Black - Hayley McElhinney

PRODUCTION TEAM

Directors Pamela Rabe (Citizens) and Tim Maddock (Soldiers)

Set Designer Robert Cousins

Costume Designer Tess Schofield

Lighting Designer Nick Schlieper

Sound Designer Paul Charlier

SYNOPSIS

About the Plays

The Serpent's Teeth is a double bill of two linked plays that explore the ways in which ordinary people struggle on with their lives in the context of war.

The first play, *Citizens*, is set at the dividing wall of an unspecified war-torn country. A series of grippingly juxtaposed events occur and a picture of life is revealed in the fragments. Over the course of the play, the fragility and nobility of the human spirit at its most vulnerable is carefully probed and laid bare.

After interval we go through the mirror. The second play, *Soldiers*, has been specially commissioned for the STC Actors Company as a companion piece to *Citizens*. Set in an echoing Air Force hangar in an un-named Australian city, family members gather to receive the bodies of their sons, brothers, husbands and friends lost in an unspecified conflict in the Middle East. The initial connection they share is the battle that claimed their loved ones.

"But there have been too many tears. Every tear that falls is a serpent's tooth." - *Citizens*

Writing about war is a moral and ethical imperative for playwright Daniel Keene. "To me, it seems more urgent than ever to write about violence, to confront it in whatever way possible," he says. Conflict is the quiet core of this double bill of two new plays by the Melbourne playwright. The two one-act plays, *Citizens* and *Soldiers: A Requiem*, portray the cost of war for people leading otherwise ordinary lives.

The first of the plays, *Citizens*, is set against the backdrop of an unidentified war in an unnamed country. The war zone of *Citizens* is no panorama of mapped terrain and incursions. Here, instead, are the lives of citizens of this country and their immediate concerns: the desire for a garden; a gift of an umbrella; the need to care for a sedated dog.

"I am concerned primarily with the cost of conflict, the cost paid by ordinary people who are simply trying to get on with their lives. What is the cost of the endurance that these characters must learn? Is there a beauty to be found in their endurance?" says Daniel.

Citizens finds difficulty and beauty in the lives of its characters. Conflict is, throughout, an unseen force that acts upon the characters, shifting the possibilities of their days. We meet characters who, faced with this erosion of choices, pick out ways to continue on. With a script that is at once spare and lyric, *Citizens* portrays conflict on a very human scale.

The second play in the double bill, *Soldiers*, was specially commissioned for the STC Actors Company as a companion piece to *Citizens*.

Soldiers brings the concerns of *Citizens* closer to home. "That's how, literally, the idea for *Soldiers* occurred to me," says Daniel, "A play about a homecoming." The homecoming is of men killed in a distant war. The play introduces us to those who mourn them - friends, lovers and relatives, many of them strangers to each other - as they gather in an air force hangar and wait for the bodies of the men to arrive. For the characters in *Soldiers*, until the news of death's definite and brutal intrusion, war had been a distant theatre.

Here in this hangar, we see a man put his hands on his knees and sit staring at them, perfectly still. For some, memories surface like accusations. For others, there is the question of what shape life could take after the loss.

***"It is labour that matters,
the shaping out of emptiness
the necessary presence of your death."
- Soldiers***

It is here that *Soldiers* finds its emotional common ground with *Citizens*. What the characters of both works experience at times is the inarticulate nature of sorrow; moments when expression falters and fails.

***"...I burn
in the suspended nightmare of his loss,
not yet able to scream, nor weep nor curse."
- Soldiers***

Both *Citizens* and *Soldiers* pose disquieting questions about war—questions as to responsibility and rationale. These questions remain unanswered. What *The Serpent's Teeth* does is to show that the real tragedy of war, in all the violence of its scale, is after all its impact on specific and precious lives.”

'Fashioning language is Daniel Keene's trade, and the playwright approaches it with visceral intensity. You can almost imagine him pulling a red-hot word from a furnace, hammering it into shape and laying it down on the page to cool.'
The Sydney Morning Herald

THE WRITER – DANIEL KEENE

Daniel Keene is a writer renowned for his unflinching gaze into the pain at the centre of the human experience.

He was born in Australia in 1955. His multi-award winning plays have been acclaimed throughout Australia, in the United States and Poland, and since the late 1990s he has established himself as one of Europe's most notable contemporary playwrights, being compared with Samuel Beckett.

During the thirty years in which he has written for the theatre, the emotional resonance of Daniel Keene's work has earned his plays critical praise and sell-out seasons in Australia, the United States and Europe. In the past decade, Daniel has established himself as one of Europe's most acclaimed contemporary playwrights, and it is there—particularly France and Germany—that his work is predominantly performed. Many of his plays have been translated into French. Daniel is pleased that his work is about to reach a main stage in Australia with the performance of *The Serpent's Teeth*.

Keene has also written for the cinema and television, as well as some libretti. He is, or has been, an actor and director, as well as a playwright.

Daniel Keene was loitering in the foyer of a Sydney theatre recently when a couple standing close by started discussing him. "He lives most of the time in France now, has done for years," said one, looking at a brochure for Keene's next play, *The Serpent's Teeth*. Keene was standing less than a metre away.

"I was right there and they didn't see me," Keene recalls with some amusement. Being ignored is something Keene, who has lived in Melbourne's Williamstown for 20 years, shrugs off. Despite winning several theatre awards in the 1980s and '90s and the 2000 NSW Premier's Prize for Literature, he has not been feted, thus far, as the next great thing in Australian theatre.

Sydney Theatre Company's production of *The Serpent's Teeth* is the first play by Keene to be programmed by a state theatre company.

The perception that he has been living in France is understandable, however, for that is where he has consolidated his reputation as an important playwright during the past 10 years. An exchange program between the STC and the Comedie Francaise in the mid-'90s led to several of his plays being translated and taken up by various directors (notably Jacques Nichet at the National Theatre of Toulouse) and performed across the country. More than 100 productions later, and with his work regularly studied in schools and universities, he is part of that country's contemporary canon. Why do the French like him so much?

"Maybe my characters are more recognisable to them," Keene says. "I'm interested in characters who don't have any power."

The Serpent's Teeth is a diptych. *Citizens* was written last year and shown to the STC's former artistic director, Robyn Nevin. She liked it and commissioned a companion piece to expand on the themes of the first and to exploit the possibilities of an ensemble of 14 actors. *Soldiers* is the result. It will be directed by a long-time associate of Keene, Tim Maddock, while *Citizens* will be directed by actor Pamela Rabe, making her directorial debut. (Rabe is also part of the cast of *Soldiers*.) Both plays are about the victims of large-scale conflicts.

Keene says European history has produced a shared understanding of suffering in war and a theatrical language that can express it. Australia, by contrast, has been a haven rather than the site of war's worst atrocities. "Countries that have suffered enormous conflicts across their lands find it easier to immediately identify what the play's about," he says.

His plays strike a chord in continental Europe and with audiences familiar with the archetypes of Greek and Roman tragedy and a theatre grammar that encompasses 20th-century experiments with expressionism, existentialism and the theatre of the absurd. The universalities of his plays are as arresting as the particulars of time and place.

The characters in *Citizens*, for example, live in the shadow of a large wall that cuts them off from their land and the sea. The play is a series of vignettes about travellers: an old man and a small boy transport an olive tree; a pair of women exchange school books; a man and his daughter walk to a funeral. In *Soldiers*, the action takes place in an aircraft hangar. Several groups of people are waiting for the bodies of their loved ones to return from a combat zone. The setting of the first play looks very like Palestine, the second is identifiably contemporary Australia, but Keene rejects the tug of the local and topical. "The wall could be anywhere," he says. "There are lots of places like that, in the past and now. I'm not actually interested in the wall itself but how those people who are in the shadow of the wall carry out their everyday lives with that manifestation of anxiety sitting right next to them."

He concedes that he intentionally set the second play in Australia.

"When I was invited to write the second part I wanted to bring the themes from the first part closer to home, literally. But I try to avoid the parochial. In *Soldiers* it's the first time I've ever written the word 'G'day'; it was a huge thing to do for me."

This aversion to anchoring the action in an identifiable landscape, and a dislike of polemic, irritates some of his critics who like the human condition to be dressed in clothes and accents they can identify, and identify with. It's also why (along with his spare, flinty language and poetic cadences) he has been compared with Irish playwright Samuel Beckett. Keene follows in the tradition of Beckett (an Irishman who also found success in France: *Waiting for Godot*, after all, was written in French and first performed in Paris). Both playwrights examine the condition of being human, in all its bleakness and existential despair. But they also laugh at the absurdity of life and examine the way the spirit manifests itself through humour.

"I find (Beckett's work) hysterically funny in the blackest possible way," Keene says. Keene's plays go through many drafts and he will pare back the script until it "sings in the air it's so clear". In the theatre, he says, viewers only hear a line once. They can't turn back the page, as with a book, and "if you waste time, it's really apparent to

the audience". The spareness of the text is matched by a leanness of characterisation.

Keene cuts little slack, making his audience listen and watch his initially anonymous creations become flesh.

"I'd rather look at characters who have to earn their existence on the stage, who have to become what they are. The audience discovers who they are by the end of the play but they can't make any assumptions when they step on stage," he says.

The subjects of Keene's plays are wide-ranging. *The Architect's Walk*, presented at the 1998 Adelaide Festival, is based on the prison diaries of Hitler's architect Albert Speer. *Elephant People*, a "sideshow opera" on tour in France, explores the thoughts of, among others, the Elephant Man, Joseph Merrick, and conjoined twins Eng and Chang. He wrote the screenplay for the film *Tom White* (2004), directed by Alkinos Tsilimidos and starring Colin Friels.

He is best known in Melbourne for the Keene/Taylor Project, a collaboration with director Ariette Taylor between 1997 and 2002 that resulted in 13 seasons, with plays such as *Scissors*, *Paper*, *Rock*, *Mysteries* and *Half and Half*. The project ended when Keene's focus was directed towards Europe.

Many of these plays deal with the dispossessed and desperate; some were performed in a furniture repository belonging to the Brotherhood of St Laurence.

Actor Dan Spielman, who appeared regularly with the Keene/Taylor Project and was formerly a

member of the STC Actors Company, had alerted Nevin to Keene's latest work. Keene relishes the opportunity to work with an ensemble, especially the ability to write each character with a specific actor in mind.

Keene is married to Alison Croggon, a poet, writer of fantasy novels and a trenchant theatre critic, both in these pages and on her blog *Theatre Notes*. She is a passionate champion of Keene's work. Despite the obvious pitfalls in doing so, Croggon intends to write about *The Serpent's Teeth* on her website. Inevitably, she will be accused of a conflict of interest, of compromising her critical independence. She has thought hard about the ethical dimensions and defends her decision in terms of the lack of critical writing on Keene and her intimate knowledge of her husband's work.

"One of the drives behind the blog was to provide a place for work that doesn't get much notice," Croggon says.

Keene's neglect looks to be a thing of the past, at least for the medium term, with a work slated for Melbourne Theatre Company's new venue opening in 2009 and another on the list for the Malthouse Theatre's 2010 season.

In France, the National Theatre of Toulouse has commissioned a piece based on the early work of German film director Rainer Werner Fassbinder.

The next time Keene loiters in an Australian theatre foyer he may be in danger of being recognised.

THE SERPENT'S TEETH – WRITER'S NOTE

Reference: from the STC program for this production, edited by Laura Scrivano

"In the midst of war, people learn how to survive, how to endure and resist. Children must still be cared for, loved ones mourned, mouths fed, friendships honoured. Everyday life does not stop to make room for the violence of war; it continues as best it can, through a changed landscape, dealing with new dangers and uncertainties. What in a time of peace might be considered an unremarkable commonplace, can in a time of war become a distant, seemingly impossible desire; what was once taken for granted suddenly becomes a raw necessity.

In *The Serpent's Teeth* I wanted to examine this notion of endurance. More specifically, I wanted to examine the cost of the injustice, displacement and loss that the conflict of war inflicts on ordinary lives.

I was not interested in looking at the lives of people with the power to escape or ignore conflict. Nor was I interested in the kinds of people whose names might appear in newspaper headlines, who issue the statements, who imagine that they have the solutions or who report the news and make the judgments. For these kinds of people there is, to some extent, the possibility, or perhaps the illusion, of standing outside conflict, of being 'objective' about the suffering that it causes.

I wanted to look only at the lives of people who cannot be anything but subjective, who have no choice but to carry on their everyday lives, with their joys, their losses, their loves and their burdens. Under the shadow of conflict and violence, they must find within themselves the ability to endure these things, to resist their pernicious, hopeless darkness. It seems to me that in this resistance is a very particular kind of hope and a particular courage. Why struggle to endure what you believe will never end? Within this ability to endure, to resist, is a belief in the final dissolution of enmity and an end to violence.

In *Citizens*, a dozen or so people try to get on with the day to day business of living in the shadow of a wall that has been erected to protect those who built it and to exclude those who could not stop it being built. The wall is a brutal, brutalising expression of fear and of failure, the failure to resolve conflict. An ancient form of defence and exclusion, it is a barrier between people, between people and what once belonged to them, between people and their freedom. It diminishes both those who build it and those who suffer from its building. In an age of almost unlimited ability to communicate, the wall is a chasm of silence across which no dialogue is possible.

In *Soldiers*, the members of five families have gathered together to count the cost of a war being waged on the other side of the earth. They have no choice but to accept this cost. They must learn how to live with it. They must learn how to endure a suffering that they do not know how to accept.

Perhaps the theatre is the place where the voices of such people can be most clearly heard. A space is made for these characters and the audience attends their stories. This space that is made and this attention that is given are ancient things; in their unique forms, they occur in almost every culture. Perhaps it is a deep, human need to create such an occasion; perhaps it is the occasion when people can put aside difference and embrace what is common among them.

Theatre cannot end wars, it cannot return to us those we have lost, and it cannot speak to those who will not listen. But theatre can sometimes be an act of faith, a prayer for those who, through no fault of their own, have had to learn how to endure suffering, no matter what son has been taken from his father, what husband from his wife, no matter whose body is returned to those who grieve, no matter what side of the wall we are on.

See also STC's web site www.sydneytheatre.com.au - which includes a video interview with playwright Daniel Keene.

DIRECTION

THE DIRECTORS – PAMELA RABE & TIM MADDOCK

Citizens is directed by Pamela Rabe, her STC directing debut. The play, which *Sun-Herald* critic Jason Blake sees as “a series of vignettes, seen in the shadow of a huge wall, we’re told, stretches for countless miles,” is directed in a linear fashion as various characters traverse this walled city from one side to another.

Reference: Andrew Taylor, “Suffer the powerless people,” Interview with Rabe and Maddock in *The Sun-Herald*, April 20 2008

Rabe: “Keene’s plays shun the characters who start and often benefit from wars such as the politicians, generals, terrorists and businessmen. That isn’t Daniel’s domain. His particular interest is powerless people and not the moneyed, the privileged and the people with the ability to articulate their views for their own ends or agendas.

In *Citizens*, the lives of common men and women unfold in the shadow of a wall dividing an unspecified community in conflict. The characters could be from Palestine, Northern Ireland or any country where the random yet predictable violence of war is just another of life’s daily hurdles.”

Soldiers is directed by Tim Maddock who has collaborated previously with Daniel Keene to unanimous critical and audience acclaim on *The Architect’s Walk* (Adelaide Festival, 1988) and *Because You Are Mine*.

Maddock: “We’re accustomed to being observers of other people’s crises and traumas. But the notion of an airplane flying back from Iraq brings the war home in a real, palpable way.... Children must still be cared for, loved ones mourned, mouths fed, friendships honoured.”

As Jason Blake opines, “Opening up the full depth of the Drama Theatre stage and making dramatic use of huge sliding doors, director Tim Maddock’s expressionistic production is stark and ceremonial (with)... strong directional lighting and reverb-enhanced voices enhance the sepulchral mood.” *The Sun-Herald*, April 27 2008

DESIGN

SET DESIGN – ROBERT COUSINS

Citizens

The set is essentially a high concrete wall with a rocky path at its base, including rubble. The character Rasid indicates the enormity of the wall in the following scene with his grandson Tariq:

“Yes, I know. The sea is on the other side. We’ll have to find another sea.... Or go the long way around that... thing. Yes, I know. It’s very long. But it must end somewhere.

Soldiers

The set for *Soldiers* is The cavernous interior of a military aircraft hangar with huge sliding doors – a monumental set. It is mid-afternoon. The audience sees the hangar’s interior at an air force base at a diagonal: at an acute angle, we can see part of the huge open doorway of the hangar. Outside, the tarmac is lit by ‘blinder’ lights. The back of the stage is dominated by the high wall of the hanger; in the centre of this wall is a set of double doors. Two luggage trolleys feature onstage. The rest of the stage is empty. Sunlight slants in from the hangar’s door from time to time, creating a large, bright patch of light on the floor.

As Bryce Hallett has pointed out in his review of *Citizens*, “A wall dominates the stage and narrows our gaze to the powerless people who savour the precious little they have and grasp for love.” (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, Mon., 28/4/08)

See the definitive text on stage design in this country, Kristen Anderson and Imogen Ross' ***Performance Design in Australia***, Craftsman House Sydney, 2001. This invaluable reference includes an extensive bibliography on set and costume design.

Reference: John McCallum, “Victims struggle for attention in wide open spaces” review in ***The Australian*** Monday pril 28, 2008

“The first, ***Citizens***, opens with a classic Keene image. An old man, accompanied by a young boy, moves painfully along a bare road in front of a vast oppressive wall, pushing a wheelbarrow in which he is carrying an olive tree. On the far side of the wall is the military power that has built it and displaced them. As the play unfolds other characters pass along the road, struggling to get on with their lives, encountering each other briefly, but always in the shadow of the wall. It is extraordinarily effective.”

SOUND DESIGN – PAUL CHARLIER

Reference: John McCallum, “Victims struggle for attention in wide open spaces” review in ***The Australian*** Monday pril 28, 2008

“Pamela Rabe's production is quiet and contemplative and the cast evoke these people with a vividness that is very moving. Paul Charlier's brooding soundscape starts with the susurrus (a rustling sound) of desert winds and grows strident by the end when the sound of a helicopter rises and its lights, from the other side, invade the space.”

CHARACTERS:

Reference: Jo Lennan, "Precious Lives," Interview with Daniel Keene in Currents, STC's Subscriber Magazine, Vol.26, No.1, March 2008

Daniel Keene's characters are not philosophers or artists: "They are not articulate in any normal sense of the word," he says.

Well, you never knew my grandfather.

- No, I didn't.

- He said things better than I can.

- *Citizens*

"What is common amongst most of them is their inability to express themselves (especially John Black in *Soldiers*)... they are not always unable to say what they mean, what they feel, what they know. Most of them, at some point, find a way to fashion from what language is at their disposal an utterance that comes close to expressing the reality of their lives. They are all trying to carry light in a basket; they are all trying to fit infinity of pain into a thimble."

The characters in *The Serpent's Teeth* arrive on-stage without biography or identity. "The characters in my plays are mostly people without privilege, who have no 'position', who have no power," Daniel says. "I choose to create characters like this because I want them to bring nothing with them, to have no biography, to be nothing to begin with. I want to create characters about whom there is little the audience can assume."

"I want the characters in my plays to live moment by moment in front of our eyes—They can do nothing else," says Daniel. "I want my characters to bring their souls to the surface of their skin. I want them to be painfully real."

In this way, Daniel Keene's pared-back plots place language—and the limits of language—at the centre of the plays. He strives, he explains, to "make the strongest possible utterance with the least amount of words". The dialogue is constructed as if with stark, clean bones, leaving only the poetry of what is essential. In this way, the plays *Citizens* and *Soldiers* are like small, urgent packages of compressed feeling.

Citizens

Rasid – an old man pushing a wheelbarrow – firstly with an olive tree, later an orange tree.

Tariq – a young boy, about 10

Basim – an old man, Hayah's father – going to attend his hated brother's funeral

Hayah – a young woman: Basim's daughter, carrying a large yellow umbrella.

Habib – a man in overalls – is given the large yellow umbrella

Safa – carries a large cardboard box containing a sedated, injured Alsatian dog.

Qasim – three young men each carrying a small sack over his shoulder. They stoop to gather stones and placing them in their sacks.

Kamil – has oranges the other two want.

Yusuf – one of the three men

Inas – a middle aged woman; gives Samirah a package of books for her daughter who wants to be a teacher.

Samirah – a middle aged woman

Aziz - a man in his twenties, pushing a shopping trolley with his and his wife Layla's possessions including a sewing machine, blankets, pots and pans etc..

Layla –his pregnant wife, also in her twenties – carries a suitcase and a small rucksack.

SOLDIERS – A REQUIEM

Tom Lewis - Tom is waiting for the return of the body of his eldest son, Steve, who was 32 when he died. Jack is Steve's son. Steve's wife, Sarah, has refused to be present at the return of her husband's body. Provides the context of the play in the following speeches:

Tom: Five men are coming home together. They're coming home together because they died together. They were mates, probably. And a fuss has to be made. Does anybody believe that they died defending their country? But they must have died for some reason. That's a bit of a problem really. Because maybe they actually died for no good reason at all. And the best way to hide that fact is to make a fuss about their deaths. No one will ask why they died if enough fuss is made about the fact that they're dead. That'll be enough.

Pause

It's a terrible thing to say, but we owe it to the dead to say it for them. They died for no good reason. No one will hear us say it. But we'll know it. And knowing it will have to be enough.

Jim: Enough for what?

Tom: Maybe it's enough to know the truth, even if you can't say it, even if no one would listen if you did.

Pause

Five mates are coming home today. They're coming home to be forgotten. Their names will be written in stone.

Jim Lewis his son, 27

Sam Lewis his son, 25. Coolly says to his brother, "Why should we be here, Jim? To keep up appearances?"

Jack Lewis, Tom's grandson who is 10 years old. Jack plays with a toy aero plane. Tom asks if he wants to be a soldier when he grows up and he shrugs in reply, but his mother doesn't want him to and his late father wasn't sure. Tom says Jack will make up his own mind.

Bill Lewis, Tom's brother (65 years) Bill says tenderly to Catherine, who has lost her son Rick in the war, "I think that's the worst thing of all. If you know a boy, a little boy, and then you know . . . the man he becomes . . . you don't forget the boy. In the death of the man is the death of the child... Our children are dead. I can't endure it. I refuse to." Jim's uncle.

Robert Holman, 45 Robert is waiting for the return of the body of his son, David, who was

21 when he died. Robert is Martin's uncle. Robert feels under scrutiny from others in the community who he feels are judging him on his response to David's death: "I get hateful looks. They drill holes in my head. Am I going to weep? Who should I weep for? A man's worth nothing if he can't keep close what he loves." Yet he didn't get on very well with David when he was alive. In death, "But that morning when I woke up I was shaking . . . and I felt something drain out of me. That's the only way I can describe it. Something drained out of me and it was David's life, all the energy and the anger and the fucking beauty of it. I'd locked it up in here, somewhere here inside of me and then I felt it drain out of me. But I felt it, at least I fucking felt it."

Martin Holman, his nephew, 23.

Eve Mellick (35) Eve is waiting for the body of her brother, Peter, who was 28 when he died.

Helen Simon (30) Helen was Peter's long term partner.

Catherine Pavic (50) Catherine is waiting for the return of the body of her son, Rick, who
was 23 when he died. At the end of the play she says tellingly to Jack, "We are strangers in a new and darker world....Now we'll learn our grief, waiting for those not coming home to come home none the less. We'll make new lives and learn to live with emptiness."

John Black (45) John is waiting for the return of the body of his brother, Alan (Emily's husband), who was 30 when he died. John turns up drunk at the air force hangar. He thinks Alice always has to think she's right. His sister-in-law Emily can't stand him.

Alice Black (35) his sister. Thinks her brother John is "gutless."

Emily Black John Black's his sister-in-law, 25, the late Alan's wife. She says, "Alan always asked a lot of the people he loved, and if you loved him, you did the best you could."

REPRESENTATIONS: Let us look at *The Serpent's Teeth* as representational plays, using Brian Moon's concept of representation.

Reference: Brian Moon, *Literary Terms A Practical Glossary*, Chalkface Press, Scarborough, WA, 1992

p. 109: "Representations are textual constructions which refer to habitual ways of thinking about or acting in the world. Although they seem to refer to the "real world", they actually refer to the cultural world which members of a society inhabit....Representations cannot be judged on the basis of 'accuracy.' Instead, they must be evaluated in terms of their social effects." p.108. Hence Keene is (re)presenting us with believable characters and their stories.

Representations: war, death, grief, brothers and the resilience of the human spirit

BEFORE SEEING THE PRODUCTION, EXPLORE THESE QUESTIONS:

1. **Research** the genre of **requiem** before seeing ***Soldiers***. Usually a musical genre, it's a mass for the repose of the souls of the dead.
2. Read other plays or screenplays either written or set in war time: e.g. Alan Seymour's Australian classic play ***The One Day of the Year***. Then look for stylistic and thematic connections between these political plays and the 2 plays that constitute ***The Serpent's Teeth***, when you have seen the production.

See the film, ***In the Valley of Elah***. (Paul Haggis, US director, 2007 - Plot Synopsis: Hank Deerfield, a retired Army veteran (Tommy Lee Jones) receives a call from his son's CO telling him that his son has gone AWOL a few days after returning from a tour of duty in Iraq.) Refer to Filmography near the end of these Teachers' Notes.

3. What do the following Australian colloquialisms mean (from ***Soldiers***)? – “She’s getting on. She’s a funny old stick. You’re talking through your arse.”
4. An image of Rasid, an old man and Tariq, a young boy, from ***Citizens***, escaping through a gap in a cavernous, divided wall, features in the poster/flyer for ***The Serpent's Teeth***.

What can you tell about the play from this image from the first play?

A portrait of characters from ***Soldiers*** features in the STC subscription brochure for ***The Serpent's Teeth***. It presents young Jack downstage in silhouette playing with his toy aero plane in a huge, bare, air force hangar. He is with other relatives, mourning, in grief, waiting for the bodies of their loved ones to arrive from war in the Middle East.

What can you tell about the play from this image from the second play?

5. Research the Palestine/Afghan War – devise a timeline.

6. **Playbuild** around the themes of:
 - **the tragedy of war**
 - **responsibility**
 - **the rationale of war/conflict**
 - **grief**
 - **resilience**

7. One feature article on ***The Serpent's Teeth*** was entitled “Specific and Precious Lives.” How does this title apply to both plays, ***Citizens*** and ***Soldiers***?

8. How does this extract from the following poem ***Lines*** by Daniel Keene apply to both plays, ***Citizens*** and ***Soldiers***?

this is a line of words
all the little corpses blackened by use and age
line upon line through which we must find a way to know
exactly what they mean

this is a line of men
standing in early morning light waiting for a train
face upon face still as pale as sleep their tired nervous hands
in their empty pockets

this is a line of children
their names written so carefully on cardboard labels tied to buttonholes
name upon name so that each of them shall be found again
their eyes as bright as coloured beads

this is a line of women
their hair covered by scarves they are very quiet
breath after breath they weave the silence into a pattern
that hangs burning in the air

these are lines of words
line upon line in the hope that somehow a voice will finally be heard
quiet enough to wake the dead that sleep
in the dreams of the living.

After seeing the production, explore these questions:

1. What expectations did you have before seeing this production? What changed for you after seeing it?
2. Can you relate the representation of a distant war in the Middle East in ***Soldiers*** to our context in Australia today? Compare and contrast.
3. *Direction* – What do you think was the vision of the directors and their interpretation of the plays?

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, involving live video footage.

See Andrew Taylor's interview with directors Tim Maddock and Pamela Rabe: "Suffer the powerless people" in ***The Sun-Herald***, April 20 2008

4. John McCallum in ***The Australian*** captioned his review (April 28, 2008) thus: "Victims struggle for attention in wide open spaces. How does this apply to both plays here?"
5. **Sketch** Robert Cousin's sets and list all the (minimal) e.g. wheelbarrow containing an olive tree, then an orange tree, a shopping trolley, filled to overflowing with a large suitcase, a sewing machine, a rug, blankets, pots and pans, bundles of clothes, a portable television, a yellow umbrella - props in ***Citizens***; a toy aeroplane for ***Soldiers***.
6. **Discuss** the impact the lighting changes in Nick Schlieper's lighting design had on the audience's experience of the play. How does lighting contribute to the mood of the scenes in each play, particularly the scene changes/breaks in ***Citizens*** and the blackouts and silhouetted figures in ***Soldiers***? What effect do these directional lighting states achieve? List some that were used, especially the use of 'blinder' lights at the end of each play.

7. Read the following monologues from ***Soldiers***:

Sam

I stay among things that have gone;
what has ceased does not cease for me.

Lights rise on Sam, alone.

My brother is swallowed in his death,
his baffled cry still echoing,
footprints still hardening in his blood.

The days at least are merciful;

I lose only what's already lost.

But at night the darkness blazes

with the music of his voice;

our games have never ended,

the rubber ball we bounced

pounds inside my chest,

our game of hide and seek

ends only when I wake

still searching for his hiding place.

Blackout.

Catherine *about her dead son Rick:*

They'll carve his name in stone,

why not here in my breast?

Why not here in the palm of my hand?

I'll wear his absence on my face,

why not his name?

There is a flame that burns

for dead soldiers;

what feeds the flame of remembrance?

The living are the fuel that memory burns.

We burn more slowly than the dead;

our crematoria are the beds we sleep in,

the streets we walk,

the rooms where we wait

for the son who is not returning.

We leave a trail of ashes

that are slowly scattered by the wind.

Alice *about her late brother Alan:* As children we
were thick as thieves,
on the garage roof
spitting and chucking stones.
He laughed at things
I didn't laugh at.
I never saw him cry.
We vowed we'd stay
best friends.

There was a distance finally
broad and empty,
our younger faces
shimmering there.

He was kind to me
when we met, always,
and I loved the way
his face kept changing as he grew
into the fullness of himself,

that broken promise.

Helen *about her late husband Alan:* His body was the shape of my touch,
his mouth the shape of my kiss.

Lights rise on Helen.

We lived in our own country
and knew each other's seasons.
His body was naked as air,
His hands a harbour and a sea.
Our bed was a wild garden
where my eyes were mirrored in his.
We drank from each other's bodies
and slept in each other's silence.
How should I remember him?
Who should I tell that I loved him?

Robert *is waiting for the return of the body of his son, David* I knew . . . before they told me. I
knew. I woke up one morning and I knew that David was dead. It was so . .
. overwhelming. And the funny thing was that I suddenly felt closer to him

than I'd been in a long time. Me and David didn't get along that well. I don't know why. There was an ocean between us. It was really like that. We had nothing to say to each other. But that morning when I woke up I was shaking . . . and I felt something drain out of me. That's the only way I can describe it. Something drained out of me and it was David's life, all the energy and the anger and the fucking beauty of it. I'd locked it up in here, somewhere here inside of me and then I felt it drain out of me. But I felt it, at least I fucking felt it.

Blackout.

In the darkness:

Tom *is waiting for the return of the body of his eldest son, Steve:*

What's left of my son?

What's in that box draped in a flag?

Have they managed

to stitch anything together?

Lights rise on Tom, alone.

Does it even resemble a body?

Does it matter?

I remember holding his hand.

That was in another life.

But it was my life.

My son in my arms is something I've felt;

my son's voice is something I've heard.

I've seen his shoulders broaden,

his voice darken with manhood.

I want to see my son again.

I don't want to remember him,

I want him in my arms

dead or living,

the bright, grave joy of his youth,

his going away and his coming home again.

I want my son.

Robert *is waiting for the return of the body of his son, David.* I hear the voice of my son calling.

He looks homewards to me
where I burn
in the suspended nightmare of his loss,
not yet able to scream, nor weep nor curse.
My son calls me
and I answer him:
come home to me now,
bring your lost life
to grief's foundry,
we'll forge a meaning from it;
the hammer of my tears
on the anvil of your blood.
It is the labour that matters,
the shaping out of emptiness
the necessary presence of your death.

Jim

Where are my brother's eyes
that saw me just born,
his hands trusted to hold me?
Light begins to rise, revealing Jim holding Jack, asleep, in his arms.
Before I opened my eyes
lying in his arms I knew him,
I felt his heart beat.

I dream that my brother
falls endlessly towards me,
a hawk shearing the high air.

Where are his eyes, his hands?
Lightly, as if it might break
he held my hand as I stumbled
out of babyhood to walk beside him.
Where is my brother's voice
that called me home from play,
that cajoled me and bickered
and told me secrets?

He falls towards me
through the high air.

Activity

Select one of these monologues to be memorised and performed for the class. Read through it very carefully. Seek clarification on any parts of the speech you do not understand.

Rewrite your monologue in your own language to make sure you understand it.

Create a mind map about your character. Show what you know about your character's personality, background, beliefs and attitudes, appearance etc.

Design a costume for your character. Label your diagram clearly and provide explanations for your choices. Provide a swatch of fabric for your costume and attach it to your design.

Rehearse your monologue. Decide how you are going to move, use the space, incorporate body language, voice, props etc.

Perform the monologue for the class.

Rehearsing a monologue

Reference: Stefan Rudnicki, *The Actor's Book of Monologues for Women*, Penguin Books London 1991, pp.6-9

Guidelines in preparing a monologue for presentation:

- Determine the **structure** of your chosen piece. Even when the selection is not strictly narrative, there is a story being told, and a story is best told with **a beginning, a middle and an end**. So, wherever possible, begin organizing your piece in terms of a three-part structure. To determine an appropriate three-part structural division, look for changes in subject matter, significant shifts in focus from one audience to another, and whatever clues (the composer) may have provided by the use, or absence, of verse stanzas, prose paragraphs or punctuation.

Once the three larger divisions are set, divide each of these into its own beginning, middle and end, until you have settled on the smallest comfortable dramatic unit, or '**beat**' – **assign beats (changes of intention in the character's motivation**, as described in the Stanislavsky System in the great Russian acting teacher's text, *An Actor Prepares*). Beats are usually expressed as verbs in the infinitive form with adjustments as adverbs. Annotate your monologue script with these.

Try also to discover what fundamental change occurs over the course of the monologue as a whole; time has passed in the reading and something *must* be different. Too many actors seem to treat monologues as if they were single, complete statements, placing a premium on consistency at the expense of the sort of variety that can really make a speech interesting.

- Another issue is **length**. The structuring process suggested above will facilitate intelligent and intelligible editing.

When the initial structuring is completed, a more detailed study of the **language** is called for, and these guidelines for working on classical texts are just as effective when working with modern material. Look for the patterns and for the exceptions to those patterns. Also look for repetitions of sounds, words and phrases (alliteration, or assonance.) Does the punctuation suggest easy flow or a stop-and-go rhythm? Is the language common or refined? Is it grounded in the senses, in things you can touch, see and hear, or is it adrift in a sea of images?

- * **Power, focus and scale** are next... You must make some decisions about what surrounds you and about the size of the world you inhabit. In order to create a complete environment, you must **determine a past and a future as well as a present**. Simply put, the past, which is always implied if not actually spoken of, is behind you. It is the place you have come from, your history, your reason for coming to *this* place, your motivation, if you will. Consequently it serves as your source of power.

The future is, of course, ahead of you. It is the world you hope to affect with your actions. Your goal is out there, your objective, your audience. Between the two is *this moment*, the plane of the present, clearly defined. On either side of you, in this present plane, are your helpers – other actors perhaps, and the props, real or imaginary – that you require to fill this moment. Borrowing a term common to

architecture, computer science and other contemporary disciplines, is this entire field made up of past, present and future, a 'matrix' or grid, the present plane of which can now be populated with people and objects which are necessary to the world of the particular monologue you are working on. These people and objects placed in the matrix, become your **focus points** and give that world its unique character and tone.

Scale derives from the size of the world you must create given the future – your goal, your audience – and the past, your power source.

To whom are you speaking? How large is your audience? Are there separate factions? This audience need not be physically present; it may be created instead by the importance or ultimate impact of the material spoken. A declaration of war made in front of a microphone in a studio may be a matter of life and death to millions, and this importance is never lost on the speaker, no matter how quietly he speaks, so the words gain weight and are delivered more slowly, very much as if he were addressing a present crowd.

For whom are you speaking? In theatre there is no such thing as a privately motivated action. Somewhere outside the physical being of the actor lies the source of each action. Is that power source a single incident or person in the past? Rarely. For instance, the scale of a great deal of women's (monologue) material derives precisely from the accumulated weight, and so the power, of both natural and historical cycles, of generations past, of all men and women.

In presenting your monologue, take the advice of lawyer Atticus Finch to his young daughter, Jean Louise (nicknamed Scout), after her involvement in a school yard fracas, in Harper Lee's 60's masterpiece, *To Kill a Mockingbird*: "*If you can learn a simple trick, Scout, you'll get along better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view - ... until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.*" (p.33, Chapter 3 of the Mandarin paperback edition.)

Present your character in journal and monologue modes."

Design - Robert Cousin's set for this production uses the space to represent various walled cities. (see below) What mood does the set evoke from the out-set of Citizens? How does this alter for Soldiers? How do they work for the lighting design in each play?

Reference: from the STC program for this production, edited by Laura Scrivano

The Berlin Wall was constructed from 1961 and divided West Berlin from East Berlin and the rest of East Germany. There was a longer 'inner German border' that marked the rest of the East-West German border between the two states. Both borders were part of the Iron Curtain. At least 133 people were killed trying to cross the wall. The Berlin wall was dismantled in 1989 after demonstrations broke out as East Germans demanded to be able to cross into West Germany. Gradually the barrier was abandoned resulting in the re-unification of Germany.

The Israeli West Bank Barrier is being constructed by Israel within the West Bank. It consists of a network of fences surrounded by a 60 metre wide exclusion area and up to eight metre high concrete walls. The barrier is a controversial project with opponents arguing that its current route (where it deviates from the 1949 Armistice Line) violates international law, severely restricts the movements of Palestinians that live nearby and is an attempt annex Palestinian land under the motive of security. Supporters of the wall argue that it is necessary to protect Israeli civilians from terrorist attacks and has helped reduce suicide bombing. There are two similar barriers in the area – the Israeli Gaza Strip barrier and the 40 foot wall separating Egypt from Gaza which was destroyed in January 2008 by Hamas militants to allow access to food and supplies for Gazans cut off by Israeli rocket attacks.

The Tortilla Wall is the name given to a 22 kilometre section of the United States border fence with Mexico. It is famously marked with graffiti, crosses and memorials to people who have died attempting to cross the border into the US illegally.

Via Anelli Wall encircles the Via Anelli quarter in Padua, Italy. It is a three metre high wall with a length of eighty four metres. The walled area used to be populated by students but is now mainly houses African refugees seeking asylum.

The Lennon Wall is in the historic city of Prague. It started out as an ordinary wall but since the 1980s people have filled it with Beatles' lyrics and John Lennon inspired graffiti. In the late 1980s students would write their grievances against the communist regime on the wall.

The Democracy Wall is located in Xidan Street in Beijing and was the focal point for democratic dissent in China during the 'Beijing Spring'. In 1978, members of the democracy movement recorded news and ideas on the wall in the form of big character posters, demanding freedom and individual rights.

The Peace Lines are a series of barriers in Northern Ireland that separate Catholic and Protestant neighbourhoods. Originally constructed in the 1970s their stated purpose is to minimise intercommunal sectarian violence between the two denominations. There are over 40 barriers today (mainly in Belfast) that stretch over 13 miles. Tourists often visit their locations to photograph the Peace Lines and their famous murals.

The Great Wall of China was built, rebuilt and maintained between 5th century BC and the 16th century to protect the northern border of the Chinese Empire. The Great Wall stretches over 6,400 kilometres. Today, although some parts of the wall have been destroyed, it is a major tourist attraction.

The Wailing Wall is a Jewish and Muslim religious site in the Old City of Jerusalem; the name referring to the Jews who come to the site to mourn the destruction of the Holy Temple. The site is under the control of Israel after they captured the Old City during the Six-Day War in 1967. The area continues to be controversial as both Jews and Arabs claim the wall as a holy site.

Bibliography

Text

Daniel Keene, *The Serpent's Teeth*, Currency Press Sydney 2008 - Two one-act plays: Citizens / Soldiers

Background Reading: Australian Theatre And General Resources

Atiq Rahimi, *Earth and Ashes* 2002 - a story of such spareness and power from an Afghan writer and film-maker, it leaves the reader reeling. Set during the Russian occupation of Afghanistan, it is a fable about war, family, home and tradition. An old man and his grandson sit in a deserted landscape of dusty roads and looming mountains. What are they waiting for? As we watch them we learn their story...Rahimi has managed to condense centuries of Afghan history into his short tale of three very different generations. At the same time, he has created a story that is universal in its power.

Graeme Blundell (ed.), *Australian Theatre: Backstage with Graeme Blundell*, Oxford University Press Melbourne 1997

Dennis Carroll, *Australian Contemporary Drama*, Currency Press Sydney 1995

John & Dorothy Colmer, *Stage*, Macmillan Australia 1986

Wayne Fairhead (ed), *Spotlights on Australian Drama - An Anthology for Senior Students*, Macmillan, Melbourne 1979

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Leonard Radic *The State of Play - the Revolution in the Australian Theatre since the 1960's* Penguin Books Melbourne, 1991

William H. Wilde, Joy Hooton and Barry Andrews, *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature*, Oxford University Press 1985

Filmography

Reference: Paul Byrnes, "High price of warrior cult – review of In the Valley of Elah in Spectrum in The Sydney Morning Herald Weekend Edition, Mar.1-2 2008

"A lot of films are now questioning the Iraq war - sort of. As usual, they are following American public opinion, rather than leading it. It's true that that this is happening more quickly than it did after Vietnam; it's also true that the war in Iraq, depending on your source, is not yet won or lost, so none of these films is really prepared to call it an unjust, immoral or pointless war – whatever the American opinion polls say"

Web Sites

www.sydneystheatre.com.au

- includes a video interview with playwright Daniel Keene

www.theaustralian.com.au/schools

This site lets you have your say in Forum, an online debate on educational matters.

www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au

hsc.csu.edu.au/english/courses

- NSW HSC On-Line 3-Unit English Course - Tutorials, Exams, Resources

- Currency Press - for references on Daniel Keene and Australian Drama

<http://edsitement.neh.fed.us>

- The EDSITEment site includes online learning guides and a hotlist of links to top humanities sites

www.bham.wednet.edu/bio/biomaker.htm

- These online lessons explain what a biography should be and walk writers through questioning, learning, synthesis, and story telling. The site includes embedded links to relevant Internet resources and tips for effective writing.

<http://falcon.jmu.edu/~ramseyil/storyhandbook.htm>

- This handbook for storytellers is filled with practical advice for story tellers on choosing, learning, and telling a story