



Sydney Theatre Company in association with Ambassador Theatre Group present



# Elling

Based on a novel by Ingvar Ambjørnsen

Stage adaptation by Axel Hellstenius

in collaboration with Petter Næss

Translated by Nicholas Norris

Adapted by Simon Bent

Directed by Pamela Rabe

## Teacher's Resource Kit

Written and compiled by Elizabeth Surbey

### Copyright

Copyright protects this Teacher's Resource Kit. Except for purposes permitted by the Copyright Act, reproduction by whatever means is prohibited. However, limited photocopying for classroom use only is permitted by educational institutions.

# Elling

A Norwegian Comedy - Wistful, melancholic, life affirming without being sentimental

Andrew Upton at the Pre show briefing for the play STC 25<sup>th</sup> May 2009

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Synopsis.....	3
Pre-performance Questions and Activities.....	5
Post Performance Questions and activities.....	6
The ‘Magic’ .....	6
Design – The Creatives .....	6
Character Descriptions .....	7
Storytelling .....	7
Creative Profile / interview .....	7
Design the set.....	7
Text comparisons .....	7
Let’s get Physical – workshop activities .....	8
Reviewing Elling.....	9
Useful links .....	12
STC Ed Website.....	12
Magical Realism.....	12
Themes, issues, ideas .....	12

# Synopsis

From STC website:

After two years of sharing a room in a mental institution Elling (Darren Gilshenan) and Kjell (Lachy Hulme) are allowed out, back into society. It's not that they're dangerous, they're just a little... hopeless.

Elling is too smart. Too sensitive. Too... Elling. And Kjell? Well, Kjell has a plan, a dream, a great ambition. He wants to lose his virginity. Preferably today.

*Elling* charts the bumps and stumbles as this truly odd couple make their way back into the world we take for granted. Over the course of the play they will build friendships, become accustomed to all things ordinary and start to experience the pleasure of the everyday.

Based on the cult Norwegian film of the same name, Simon Bent's adaptation of *Elling* was first performed at London's Bush Theatre in 2007 and, due to its huge success, went on to transfer to Trafalgar Studios in the West End.

Even the hardest heart will struggle not to be touched by the characters' plight and the joy with which they discover the richness of life in the 'real' world. Pamela Rabe directs this charming celebration of the simple things in life: freedom and fellowship.

## Act 1:

Scene 1: Kjell and Elling at the institution

The two 'inmates' meet for the first time and we discover that Kjell 'doesn't sleep' and Elling 'keeps a notebook' of his writing. Kjell (pronounced shell) is a virgin and doesn't like being one! Elling mentions he came from a navy life. . .and other stories.

Scene 2: some time has passed and they are to be released

Nurse Gunn has found Elling's notebook, revealing his inner thoughts and feelings. Elling has been dependent on his mother – until she died and he couldn't cope without her. Kjell and Elling have a train to catch.

Scene 3: at the train station

Scene 4: the apartment

They meet Frank Asli. He is their social worker there to assist their transition to a normal life.

**Act 2:**

Scene 1: the apartment and the telephone

Scene 2: the restaurant

Kjell meets Johanne the waitress and Elling meets Alfons in the toilet

Scene 3: The Christmas tree and Reidun Nordsletten

Kjell rescues the pregnant neighbour

**Act 3:**

Scene 1: the hotdog and the poet

Must they fight about Reidun? Elling recalls the modern poetry reading. Elling gives Alfons his phone number.

Scene 2: Reidun reveals her true feelings

Scene 3: Alfons and Elling

Kjell meets Alfons and his 58 Buick Century hardtop. "The city of Oslo's new emergency rescue team. Pregnant or elderly, call day or night."

**Act 4:**

Scene 1: Sauerkraut poetry

Elling finds purpose and Kjell asks Reidun out. Alfons invites them to the cabin.

Scene 2: the cabin

Scene 3: A baby is born with the dawn

Scene 4: the next day

## Pre-performance Questions and Activities

1. Discuss with your students what they know of mental illness. Why would anyone spend time in an asylum? Who would they expect to meet there and how would they expect them to act? Do they have any preconceptions of what someone with mental health issues might act like?

You might also cover what governments do in order to support people living with mental illness.

2. The play has elements that are in the immediate life of the characters as well as crossing time changes theatrically. Discuss what theatrical conventions might be used to transition time in a play and on the stage – What can you do without a blackout to make this happen for an audience?
3. There are also events that are perhaps not in the real world – or perhaps might be considered ‘surreal’ in the play. Discuss theatrical conventions that might include narrative reflections or storytelling, and other devices like flashbacks.
4. Review the clip from the website – Pamela Rabe (the Director) speaks about her experience with the play *Elling*.

## Post Performance Questions and activities

### The 'Magic'

There are many theatrical and narrative 'magical' elements in this production. They are developed around the characters as well as the production elements. Can the students identify these?

E.g. - characterisations and dialogue / phone conversations / the radio / reveals in the set wall / use of the sound changes / the radio / the Christmas tree reveal / the sauerkraut in the wardrobe / anything in the wardrobe

### Design – The Creatives

Give a detailed response to the creative input in the play – Each creative brings something of significance to the storytelling on stage.

#### the lighting designer - Nick Schlieper

“To allow the characters to travel seamlessly – then be transported somewhere else completely” from the apartment to everywhere in quiet distinction.

#### the costume designer - Tess Schofield

She was encouraged to be organic utilizing the blackboard walls to outline the actual actors' silhouette - then build their characters on them during rehearsals

See the 'Costume Note' on the website to download a note from the designer and design photos.

#### the set designer - Michael Scott Mitchell

presenting a blank canvas for the actors to control – a kind of non-space. A large advent calendar which might reveal pockets of reality when parts of the wall slide back. Images were deliberately disconnected to the action – playing with the real and the truth and then the questions once again about what is really there and what is fabrication.

#### the sound designer - Max Lyandvert

The play reveals an almost prescriptive 'jukebox' in the early scenes to set the piece – but the play rides the line of truth yet is not a film – the sound has two contradictory comments – the immediate and the psychological – when it is live and apparently from the radio and then when it grows and metamorphoses to fill the theatre entirely – presenting some magical realism within the play

Commentary taken from the subscribers briefing 25/5/09

Sydney Theatre Company's *Elling* Notes © 2009

## Character Descriptions

Write character descriptions for the characters in the play:

Elling

Kjell Bjarne

Frank Asli

Alfons Jorgenson

Reidun Nordsletten

## Storytelling

Discuss the importance in the storytelling of such characters as Nurse Gunn, Johanne the waitress, the Performance Poets.

## Creative Profile / interview

On the STC Ed website, download, read and discuss the interview and articles with Elling's Darren Gilshenan for insight's into creating the character of Elling

## Design the set from the description in the play

The main action of the play takes place in and around an apartment in Oslo. The present. The basic set to begin with is two single beds centre stage, on the diagonal. One bed upstage left, with a wardrobe at some distance and further along the diagonal. The other bed downstage right. The foot of each bed facing downstage left corner. A low bedside cupboard by the side of both beds.

## Text comparisons

There is much of these characters and their co-dependence that has reminiscence to Samuel Beckett's "Waiting for Godot" – explore this other text to make comparisons – are Elling and Kjell potentially Vladimir and Estragon? - is Pozzo in Frank??

Have you seen the series or the movie "the Odd Couple" – this was also a stage play first. Research the play and suggest any similarities.

*The Odd Couple* is a 1965 Broadway play by Neil Simon, followed by a successful film and television series, as well as other derivative works and spin offs, many featuring one or more of

the same actors. The plot concerns two mismatched roommates, one neat and uptight, the other more easygoing but slovenly. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Odd\\_Couple](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Odd_Couple)

Write a short scene or play for two players whom you might think of as an 'odd couple'.

## Let's get Physical – workshop activities

**Improvise a scene** based on the play "Elling". Select from the titles suggested in the synopsis breakdown (above in synopsis section) or one of these:

- I never knew that about you
- Why didn't you tell me in the first place
- I made it myself
- I have a friend
- I need you

What **music** would you use to support the play? Can you research actual songs that might make a comment on a particular character or event from the play?

**The characters** go around each other in a merry dance at times – coming up against each other or avoiding – Elling and Kjell against the bed then the chase around the apartment. Ellings avoidance of Frank when he thinks he has done the wrong thing as an 'outpatient' – in small groups **physically explore space** and how coming close might frighten or intimidate. Play with notions of master and servant and powerplays and dominance of characters. Can you physicalise bravado and / or cowardice.

**Acting:** - read the interview with Darren Gilshenan and attempt the strategies he used when exploring the 'anxiety' of his character Elling. What effect does this have on you? Was it easier to become another character using such physical techniques?



## **Reviewing Elling**

A guideline for reviewing productions, possibly for a log book in Drama or as a journal entry in English.

If you attend a play, film, concert, opera, musical, school production etc. - write about it critically.

1. Did you enjoy it? Why?
2. What was good or effective? What was bad or didn't communicate with you?
3. How is a good production, and this one in particular, achieved?
4. Did the rest of the audience enjoy it?
5. Was the plot communicated clearly?
6. Was the acting good? (What is good acting?)
7. Set and costumes: Credible? Bad or good? Too much or too little? If the set and costumes play too much of a part in the drama, this is considered an imposing or negative thing.
8. Was the play convincing, dull, funny, hilarious, dark, mediocre? Why? Why not?
9. Was the script/play credible?

## **Writing a review**

While watching *ELLING* you will be forming opinions and making judgments about the play and the production. The critic's job is to pass comment on the quality of the show informing others about its good and bad points in the process. When writing a review of a play, there is a lot to think about. You may not want to comment on every aspect of the play, but the following outline will help you to structure your review.

### **1. Introduction**

Title:

Writer(s):

Company:

Where and when you saw the play:

How you felt about seeing the play before it started:

### **2. The play**

Give a brief outline of the story and the main characters.

Identify major themes, issues, ideas in *ELLING*.

What do you perceive was the intention of the piece?

How do you interpret it?

What was the impact of the performance?

How did it make you feel?

Did you find the story convincing?

Which parts worked best for you?

Were there any moments that stirred your emotions?

How did the audience react to the play?

How did you feel about the characters?

Which one did you respond to most and why?

### **3. The set**

*Some stage sets are very elaborate, others little more than a bare stage.*

Identify design elements in the production.

How else could *ELLING* have been designed and staged?

How appropriate is this set to the play and to the space it is being performed in?

Did anything about the set particularly catch your eye?

How did the actors use the set?

### **4. The acting**

How did you rate the actors?

Comment on voice, gesture and movement.

What things did they do to distinguish between the characters they played?

Who did you sympathise/empathise with?

Identify the skills of the particular actors. Define their performance style. What makes them unique?

### **5. Conclusion**

Bring in anything that you thought was remarkably good or bad about the production.

List any elements in the performance that seemed unnecessary / ineffective.

On balance, was it a successful show?

Did it keep your interest and involve you with the characters?

Did it make you laugh, cry, think?

Was it suitable for its audience?

Compare *ELLING* with other live performances you may have seen.

**Download and read the reviews of the STC production on the STC Ed website and read the review of the London Production (below) for comparison:**

The presence of Life on Mars star John Simm will pull in the crowds for Simon Bent's adaptation of Ingvar Ambjornsen's novel, already a successful movie. They are in for a rare treat, because this is the most blissfully funny and touching evening I've had in the theatre for ages.

Simm plays the middle-aged Elling, a baby-faced innocent who is a bit of a mummy's boy. But mummy has died, and Elling - mad poet, teller of tall tales and prone to anxiety and dizziness - is incarcerated in the asylum. When he has been coaxed out of the wardrobe he becomes friends with Bjarne (Adrian Bower), a simple, bear-like man whose only desire is to have sex and whose joyous pronouncements tend to be along the lines of: "Holy cow, Elling, you've committed poetry!"

But can this odd couple survive together out in the big wide world? The asylum's resident Nurse Ratched doesn't think they stand a chance in hell. When the two are allocated a flat, their social worker Frank has grave doubts about their abilities to use the telephone and order a pizza. Particularly as Elling shows no signs of ever leaving the flat on the grounds that "mother did all the shopping; I was in charge of ideology".

Maybe you don't have to reside in reality all the time and maybe Elling's mindset and Bjarne's childlike simplicity are reasonable responses to a mad, mad world. Even if that is the case, can Elling and Bjarne's friendship survive the exchange of Christmas presents, and encounters with poetry readings and a heavily pregnant angel?

Writer Bent and director Paul Miller create an evening which is both delicate and robust. This could so easily have just been a charming little oddity, but there is a rigor in the writing and direction that transforms it into a parable about the nature of happiness, the need to be open and how all our lives would be improved by more poetry, more sex and more pork with gravy.

Simm and Bower are sensational, and there is brilliant support from Jonathan Cecil as a poet with writer's block, Keir Charles as the social worker and Ingrid Lacey as an assortment of angels and devils. Rare, very rare.

Lyn Gardner , The Guardian, Tuesday 1 May 2007 12.43 BST  
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2007/may/01/theatre>

## Useful links

**Performance poetry** is poetry that is specifically composed for or during performance before an audience. During the 1980s, the term came into popular usage to describe poetry written or composed for performance rather than print distribution. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Performance\\_poetry](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Performance_poetry)

**STC Ed Website** [www.sydneytheatre.com.au/education](http://www.sydneytheatre.com.au/education)

Head to the *Elling* Schools day page and ...

- View an interview video clip with Pamela Rabe
- Download interviews with and articles about Darren Gilshenan creating *Elling*
- Download an article and pictures from Costume Designer Tess Schofield talking about the process of creating Costumes for *Elling*
- View production photos

## Magical Realism

We are offered a new style that is thoroughly of this world, that celebrates the mundane. This new world of objects is still alien to the current idea of Realism. It employs various techniques that endow all things with a deeper meaning and reveal mysteries that always threaten the secure tranquility of simple and ingenuous things.... it is a question of representing before our eyes, in an intuitive way, the fact, the interior figure, of the exterior world.

## Themes, issues, ideas

Love	Freedom
Identity	Justice
Search for purpose	Experience
Depression	Personal achievement
Fear	Betrayal
Anxiety	The muse
Life's tests and challenges	Legacy
Friendship	Live Life
Dependency	Belonging
Getting out	



Sydney Theatre Company in association with Ambassador Theatre Group present



# Elling

Based on a novel by Ingvar Ambjørnsen

Stage adaptation by Axel Hellstenius

in collaboration with Petter Næss

Translated by Nicholas Norris

Adapted by Simon Bent

Directed by Pamela Rabe

## Teacher's Resource Kit

Written and compiled by Elizabeth Surbey

### Copyright

Copyright protects this Teacher's Resource Kit. Except for purposes permitted by the Copyright Act, reproduction by whatever means is prohibited. However, limited photocopying for classroom use only is permitted by educational institutions.

# Elling

A Norwegian Comedy - Wistful, melancholic, life affirming without being sentimental

Andrew Upton at the Pre show briefing for the play STC 25<sup>th</sup> May 2009

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Synopsis.....	3
Pre-performance Questions and Activities.....	5
Post Performance Questions and activities.....	6
The ‘Magic’ .....	6
Design – The Creatives .....	6
Character Descriptions .....	7
Storytelling .....	7
Creative Profile / interview .....	7
Design the set.....	7
Text comparisons .....	7
Let’s get Physical – workshop activities .....	8
Reviewing Elling.....	9
Useful links .....	12
STC Ed Website.....	12
Magical Realism.....	12
Themes, issues, ideas .....	12

# Synopsis

From STC website:

After two years of sharing a room in a mental institution Elling (Darren Gilshenan) and Kjell (Lachy Hulme) are allowed out, back into society. It's not that they're dangerous, they're just a little... hopeless.

Elling is too smart. Too sensitive. Too... Elling. And Kjell? Well, Kjell has a plan, a dream, a great ambition. He wants to lose his virginity. Preferably today.

*Elling* charts the bumps and stumbles as this truly odd couple make their way back into the world we take for granted. Over the course of the play they will build friendships, become accustomed to all things ordinary and start to experience the pleasure of the everyday.

Based on the cult Norwegian film of the same name, Simon Bent's adaptation of *Elling* was first performed at London's Bush Theatre in 2007 and, due to its huge success, went on to transfer to Trafalgar Studios in the West End.

Even the hardest heart will struggle not to be touched by the characters' plight and the joy with which they discover the richness of life in the 'real' world. Pamela Rabe directs this charming celebration of the simple things in life: freedom and fellowship.

## Act 1:

Scene 1: Kjell and Elling at the institution

The two 'inmates' meet for the first time and we discover that Kjell 'doesn't sleep' and Elling 'keeps a notebook' of his writing. Kjell (pronounced shell) is a virgin and doesn't like being one! Elling mentions he came from a navy life. . .and other stories.

Scene 2: some time has passed and they are to be released

Nurse Gunn has found Elling's notebook, revealing his inner thoughts and feelings. Elling has been dependent on his mother – until she died and he couldn't cope without her. Kjell and Elling have a train to catch.

Scene 3: at the train station

Scene 4: the apartment

They meet Frank Asli. He is their social worker there to assist their transition to a normal life.

**Act 2:**

Scene 1: the apartment and the telephone

Scene 2: the restaurant

Kjell meets Johanne the waitress and Elling meets Alfons in the toilet

Scene 3: The Christmas tree and Reidun Nordsletten

Kjell rescues the pregnant neighbour

**Act 3:**

Scene 1: the hotdog and the poet

Must they fight about Reidun? Elling recalls the modern poetry reading. Elling gives Alfons his phone number.

Scene 2: Reidun reveals her true feelings

Scene 3: Alfons and Elling

Kjell meets Alfons and his 58 Buick Century hardtop. "The city of Oslo's new emergency rescue team. Pregnant or elderly, call day or night."

**Act 4:**

Scene 1: Sauerkraut poetry

Elling finds purpose and Kjell asks Reidun out. Alfons invites them to the cabin.

Scene 2: the cabin

Scene 3: A baby is born with the dawn

Scene 4: the next day



## Pre-performance Questions and Activities

1. Discuss with your students what they know of mental illness. Why would anyone spend time in an asylum? Who would they expect to meet there and how would they expect them to act? Do they have any preconceptions of what someone with mental health issues might act like?

You might also cover what governments do in order to support people living with mental illness.

2. The play has elements that are in the immediate life of the characters as well as crossing time changes theatrically. Discuss what theatrical conventions might be used to transition time in a play and on the stage – What can you do without a blackout to make this happen for an audience?
3. There are also events that are perhaps not in the real world – or perhaps might be considered ‘surreal’ in the play. Discuss theatrical conventions that might include narrative reflections or storytelling, and other devices like flashbacks.
4. Review the clip from the website – Pamela Rabe (the Director) speaks about her experience with the play *Elling*.

## Post Performance Questions and activities

### The 'Magic'

There are many theatrical and narrative 'magical' elements in this production. They are developed around the characters as well as the production elements. Can the students identify these?

E.g. - characterisations and dialogue / phone conversations / the radio / reveals in the set wall / use of the sound changes / the radio / the Christmas tree reveal / the sauerkraut in the wardrobe / anything in the wardrobe

### Design – The Creatives

Give a detailed response to the creative input in the play – Each creative brings something of significance to the storytelling on stage.

#### the lighting designer - Nick Schlieper

“To allow the characters to travel seamlessly – then be transported somewhere else completely” from the apartment to everywhere in quiet distinction.

#### the costume designer - Tess Schofield

She was encouraged to be organic utilizing the blackboard walls to outline the actual actors' silhouette - then build their characters on them during rehearsals

See the 'Costume Note' on the website to download a note from the designer and design photos.

#### the set designer - Michael Scott Mitchell

presenting a blank canvas for the actors to control – a kind of non-space. A large advent calendar which might reveal pockets of reality when parts of the wall slide back. Images were deliberately disconnected to the action – playing with the real and the truth and then the questions once again about what is really there and what is fabrication.

#### the sound designer - Max Lyandvert

The play reveals an almost prescriptive 'jukebox' in the early scenes to set the piece – but the play rides the line of truth yet is not a film – the sound has two contradictory comments – the immediate and the psychological – when it is live and apparently from the radio and then when it grows and metamorphoses to fill the theatre entirely – presenting some magical realism within the play

Commentary taken from the subscribers briefing 25/5/09

Sydney Theatre Company's *Elling* Notes © 2009

## Character Descriptions

Write character descriptions for the characters in the play:

Elling

Kjell Bjarne

Frank Asli

Alfons Jorgenson

Reidun Nordsletten

## Storytelling

Discuss the importance in the storytelling of such characters as Nurse Gunn, Johanne the waitress, the Performance Poets.

## Creative Profile / interview

On the STC Ed website, download, read and discuss the interview and articles with Elling's Darren Gilshenan for insight's into creating the character of Elling

## Design the set from the description in the play

The main action of the play takes place in and around an apartment in Oslo. The present. The basic set to begin with is two single beds centre stage, on the diagonal. One bed upstage left, with a wardrobe at some distance and further along the diagonal. The other bed downstage right. The foot of each bed facing downstage left corner. A low bedside cupboard by the side of both beds.

## Text comparisons

There is much of these characters and their co-dependence that has reminiscence to Samuel Beckett's "Waiting for Godot" – explore this other text to make comparisons – are Elling and Kjell potentially Vladimir and Estragon? - is Pozzo in Frank??

Have you seen the series or the movie "the Odd Couple" – this was also a stage play first. Research the play and suggest any similarities.

*The Odd Couple* is a 1965 Broadway play by Neil Simon, followed by a successful film and television series, as well as other derivative works and spin offs, many featuring one or more of

the same actors. The plot concerns two mismatched roommates, one neat and uptight, the other more easygoing but slovenly. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Odd\\_Couple](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Odd_Couple)

Write a short scene or play for two players whom you might think of as an 'odd couple'.

## Let's get Physical – workshop activities

**Improvise a scene** based on the play "Elling". Select from the titles suggested in the synopsis breakdown (above in synopsis section) or one of these:

- I never knew that about you
- Why didn't you tell me in the first place
- I made it myself
- I have a friend
- I need you

What **music** would you use to support the play? Can you research actual songs that might make a comment on a particular character or event from the play?

**The characters** go around each other in a merry dance at times – coming up against each other or avoiding – Elling and Kjell against the bed then the chase around the apartment. Ellings avoidance of Frank when he thinks he has done the wrong thing as an 'outpatient' – in small groups **physically explore space** and how coming close might frighten or intimidate. Play with notions of master and servant and powerplays and dominance of characters. Can you physicalise bravado and / or cowardice.

**Acting:** - read the interview with Darren Gilshenan and attempt the strategies he used when exploring the 'anxiety' of his character Elling. What effect does this have on you? Was it easier to become another character using such physical techniques?

## **Reviewing Elling**

A guideline for reviewing productions, possibly for a log book in Drama or as a journal entry in English.

If you attend a play, film, concert, opera, musical, school production etc. - write about it critically.

1. Did you enjoy it? Why?
2. What was good or effective? What was bad or didn't communicate with you?
3. How is a good production, and this one in particular, achieved?
4. Did the rest of the audience enjoy it?
5. Was the plot communicated clearly?
6. Was the acting good? (What is good acting?)
7. Set and costumes: Credible? Bad or good? Too much or too little? If the set and costumes play too much of a part in the drama, this is considered an imposing or negative thing.
8. Was the play convincing, dull, funny, hilarious, dark, mediocre? Why? Why not?
9. Was the script/play credible?

## **Writing a review**

While watching *ELLING* you will be forming opinions and making judgments about the play and the production. The critic's job is to pass comment on the quality of the show informing others about its good and bad points in the process. When writing a review of a play, there is a lot to think about. You may not want to comment on every aspect of the play, but the following outline will help you to structure your review.

### **1. Introduction**

Title:

Writer(s):

Company:

Where and when you saw the play:

How you felt about seeing the play before it started:

### **2. The play**

Give a brief outline of the story and the main characters.

Identify major themes, issues, ideas in *ELLING*.

What do you perceive was the intention of the piece?

How do you interpret it?

What was the impact of the performance?

How did it make you feel?

Did you find the story convincing?

Which parts worked best for you?

Were there any moments that stirred your emotions?

How did the audience react to the play?

How did you feel about the characters?

Which one did you respond to most and why?

### **3. The set**

*Some stage sets are very elaborate, others little more than a bare stage.*

Identify design elements in the production.

How else could *ELLING* have been designed and staged?

How appropriate is this set to the play and to the space it is being performed in?

Did anything about the set particularly catch your eye?

How did the actors use the set?

### **4. The acting**

How did you rate the actors?

Comment on voice, gesture and movement.

What things did they do to distinguish between the characters they played?

Who did you sympathise/empathise with?

Identify the skills of the particular actors. Define their performance style. What makes them unique?

### **5. Conclusion**

Bring in anything that you thought was remarkably good or bad about the production.

List any elements in the performance that seemed unnecessary / ineffective.

On balance, was it a successful show?

Did it keep your interest and involve you with the characters?

Did it make you laugh, cry, think?

Was it suitable for its audience?

Compare *ELLING* with other live performances you may have seen.

**Download and read the reviews of the STC production on the STC Ed website and read the review of the London Production (below) for comparison:**

The presence of Life on Mars star John Simm will pull in the crowds for Simon Bent's adaptation of Ingvar Ambjornsen's novel, already a successful movie. They are in for a rare treat, because this is the most blissfully funny and touching evening I've had in the theatre for ages.

Simm plays the middle-aged Elling, a baby-faced innocent who is a bit of a mummy's boy. But mummy has died, and Elling - mad poet, teller of tall tales and prone to anxiety and dizziness - is incarcerated in the asylum. When he has been coaxed out of the wardrobe he becomes friends with Bjarne (Adrian Bower), a simple, bear-like man whose only desire is to have sex and whose joyous pronouncements tend to be along the lines of: "Holy cow, Elling, you've committed poetry!"

But can this odd couple survive together out in the big wide world? The asylum's resident Nurse Ratched doesn't think they stand a chance in hell. When the two are allocated a flat, their social worker Frank has grave doubts about their abilities to use the telephone and order a pizza. Particularly as Elling shows no signs of ever leaving the flat on the grounds that "mother did all the shopping; I was in charge of ideology".

Maybe you don't have to reside in reality all the time and maybe Elling's mindset and Bjarne's childlike simplicity are reasonable responses to a mad, mad world. Even if that is the case, can Elling and Bjarne's friendship survive the exchange of Christmas presents, and encounters with poetry readings and a heavily pregnant angel?

Writer Bent and director Paul Miller create an evening which is both delicate and robust. This could so easily have just been a charming little oddity, but there is a rigor in the writing and direction that transforms it into a parable about the nature of happiness, the need to be open and how all our lives would be improved by more poetry, more sex and more pork with gravy.

Simm and Bower are sensational, and there is brilliant support from Jonathan Cecil as a poet with writer's block, Keir Charles as the social worker and Ingrid Lacey as an assortment of angels and devils. Rare, very rare.

Lyn Gardner , The Guardian, Tuesday 1 May 2007 12.43 BST  
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2007/may/01/theatre>

## Useful links

**Performance poetry** is poetry that is specifically composed for or during performance before an audience. During the 1980s, the term came into popular usage to describe poetry written or composed for performance rather than print distribution. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Performance\\_poetry](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Performance_poetry)

**STC Ed Website** [www.sydneytheatre.com.au/education](http://www.sydneytheatre.com.au/education)

Head to the *Elling* Schools day page and ...

- View an interview video clip with Pamela Rabe
- Download interviews with and articles about Darren Gilshenan creating *Elling*
- Download an article and pictures from Costume Designer Tess Schofield talking about the process of creating Costumes for *Elling*
- View production photos

## Magical Realism

We are offered a new style that is thoroughly of this world, that celebrates the mundane. This new world of objects is still alien to the current idea of Realism. It employs various techniques that endow all things with a deeper meaning and reveal mysteries that always threaten the secure tranquility of simple and ingenuous things.... it is a question of representing before our eyes, in an intuitive way, the fact, the interior figure, of the exterior world.

## Themes, issues, ideas

Love	Freedom
Identity	Justice
Search for purpose	Experience
Depression	Personal achievement
Fear	Betrayal
Anxiety	The muse
Life's tests and challenges	Legacy
Friendship	Live Life
Dependency	Belonging
Getting out	



## Costume Note

Tess Schofield

I have had the privilege of designing costumes for *Elling* within the rehearsal room. I'd always planned on that, yet the day before the commencement of rehearsals I pondered this departure from my usual process and how I might explain and do it! I could see Reidun Nordsletten, lying at the bottom of a flight of stairs like a fallen angel, a chalk tracing around her broken body, and felt instantly grateful that Pamela had driven the painting of a chalkboard wall in our large rehearsal room prior to her direction of *The Serpent's Teeth*. I could outline the actors on that wall, then design life size in full view. Whacko!



I draw. I think and feel when I draw. I discover, meditate and focus when I draw. I design costumes immersed in the character and text, visualising, imagining and rendering ideas. I usually draw curled in the corner of some cave, yet the *Elling* rehearsal room has nowhere to hide, so armed with a handful of chalk and a damp wettex, I was invited to share my process with my colleagues. Conversing with and listening to the actors, creative team and stage management as they discovered and explored the world of *Elling* in rehearsals became the background for my work - a liberating, collaborative and shared experience to support the story telling of this gorgeous gem of a play.

Costume Design References



# Interview with Darren Gilshenan during the Rehearsals

by Elizabeth Surbey

1) *Tell me what you think of the play?*

I love it. It's a beautiful play it's got enormous heart. It's all the finer elements of human nature; friendship, love, conquering fears, mental illness and dealing with it. For what looks like a play about a couple of crazy guys its actually a play about everyone in a way, their social illnesses or their anxieties, their disorders are just heightened versions of what we all feel – anxiety just turned up to 11. So they're not what you would say schizophrenic or insane they don't have those kind of illness, it's more social illnesses. They suffer from agoraphobia, anxiety, compulsive disorder.

2) *Who is your Elling? Can you illuminate your process of characterisation? How have you found your 'Elling'?*

Well I did quite a bit of research into anxiety disorder and I came up with a handful of physical attributes that I used as a starting point – shortness of breath, muscle seizing and tension, dizziness (*do you mean ticks and twitches?*) Not so much twitches, I am really conscious of not parodying or playing the illness but things to do with his breathing and what happens to the quality of his voice when there's that kind of nervous energy inside the stomach. So I guess I took some research about the illnesses but he's kind of a complex creature he's also incredibly intelligent, very well read and very political, politically natured and has very much an Oedipus complex with his mother, his dead mother. So as far as arriving at Elling it's still very much a work in progress.

Technically I move my voice up into my mask (*indicating his head / face*) up here because this is where the brain is and he's very much a brain character, he over thinks things to the degree where he reaches inertia and just stops doing things 'cause he can't make a decision. So a lot of the voice placement is up in the head.

Fast rhythms, he's very quick, a quick rhythmmed character so his vocal patterns are quite staccato and quite quick and erratic. Highly emotional as well, capable of just changing colours in emotion quite erratically. In a strange kind of way you have to be very loose when playing a very bound character in order to be able to not get caught in rage.

*(Has Elling something of the commedia character about him? Is he a master is he a servant?)*

He changes, he would be a master. He would consider himself a master; however the world treats him like a servant. So his idea of himself is quite delusional. He believes he is greater than and better than and continuously meets his short comings all the way through the piece. Particularly when he deals with the social worker, Frank Asli (*pronounced Ors-li*) who keeps making him aware that he is riddled with problems.

3) *Do we all have a little bit of Elling in us? Is his humour and dryness or sarcasm his security only? Is it his survival mechanism? – We witness him at times at his most vulnerable – the train station for instance – what do we learn about him there?*

I think its all survival. He's been living in a house with his mother all his life, seemingly never ventured outside, a very Norman Bates style relationship with his mother. Suddenly his mother has died and has obviously been dead in the house and he's been abducted by the police, as he said, and moved into an institution so from the moment you discover him, he comes out of a cupboard and the way in which he deals with the world is to push it away, in order to not have anyone get to know him. I think we are all capable of doing that to people. As you go further into the play his friendship with Kjell solidifies, he learns to trust Kjell and he discovers how to love someone else apart from his mother, and therefore how to love himself. He discovers the best way out of his anxiety is just to do things for other people so he starts doing things for Kjell and that makes him feel good.

4) *How important is his relationship with Kjell Bjarne?*

It's paramount, it's, in a way 'the odd couple', kind of ripping on that classic comedy duo. You've got the one slovenly, women and food obsessed pig, who's Kjell and then the anxious neat freak, closeted religious freak Elling. They are both great foils for one another all the way through it and they have very much a love/hate relationship much like an old married couple. At times they drive each other insane and have extraordinary fights and then at other times they completely come together and share beautiful moments. The interesting thing has been how self aware they are of their actions. It's seems to me that well-adjusted people are very self aware whereas not well adjusted people aren't very self aware. A lot of their behaviour surprises them after its come out.

*(Are you expecting to find the audience will be at times for one or the other?)*

The tricky thing with an audience, and we haven't had that really yet – except the same people in the rehearsal room every day – is trying to find the balance in the comedy and the pathos and the play is a real knife-edged piece, you could go out there and get a laugh in this piece from the moment its started, you know, two

crazy guys. Observing the dramatic principals we are letting the comedy come from heightened pain; anxiety turned up, fear turned up, obsession turned up, and these things allow the comedy to be very real.

5) *Some have described ELLING as a black comedy? What do you think about that? Is it too savage on its characters? Or do we really need to care about them?*

I think Black Comedy for me is always comedy that you don't necessarily laugh at. It's taking things that are so perverse, so obscene or so dark, so dangerous and putting them in a hyper situation that makes you sit there gasping in a way at the fact that people can seem to waltz through. There's a great black comic play, 'the Lieutenant of Innishmore' where one of these characters is hanging upside down by his feet while this other guy is cutting his ears off ...that's black comedy, you're sitting there horrified at the casualness. Quentin Tarantino is black comedy. This play is a little gentler, it has darkness in it, it has tortured painful characters, but it's much more a 'feelgood' comedy.

6) What has Pamela Rabe brought to this production that you might feel is distinctive?

Having an actor to work with. Understanding that these characters are quite complex and really require a lot of character analysis. Pamela is such a great actor herself; she really knows how to talk the acting lingo, and how to really get inside characters, and how to create characters that are three-dimensional. Always looking at 'yes you want something but what's the obstacle that's stopping you from getting it?' Rather than making anything simple always looking at the forces that work against it. 3D characters are, a lot of the time, to do with inner and outer wants. On the outside you show the world what you think you want them to see, but inside there is something else driving it. You want the world to see you as successful, so you dress up in your suit and you present yourself, but inside there's a person crying for recognition. So having an actor as a director who loves to talk about the psychology of character rather than necessarily the shapes, the blocking and the bigger pictures; which she's all over as well, but having some fascinating talks about character psychology which I'm finding really enjoyable.

7) You also bring something distinctive to the role – you have a history of physical performances – does that matter here?

Well they're pretty physical characters, in lots of subtle ways. There is lots of movement in the piece. Not big overt movement, but in the idiosyncratic nature of the character they are very physical. So there's lots of little physical attributes and

little things that I'm really enjoying as, I guess someone who's done a lot of physical performance, enjoying putting into the character as well. I have done an enormous amount of Shakespeare, so I have a great enthusiasm for language and these characters have such fantastic little conversations, really intense little, bang bang bang bang – short sharp exchanges and every now and again there's a big waffle, a big rant which is more about the mania, more than anything – then they'll settle back into one one one one. So there is a big physical life to it.

8) *Tell me how the design vision works for you? You have been in productions with quite elaborate sets and costumes that themselves dictate much of what the production is about. What do you think this design concept does for the play?*

It is simple and its very actor driven, we have to move all the furniture around to create the different spaces, because the play was taken from the film, like film it jumps scenes, it jumps places, you know you go to a café you go to a cabin you go to their apartment and then you are out in the street and then back in the apartment so creating that in the theatrical environment you need to be quite imaginative because the characters in a way are very full of fantasy in their thinking it allows us to be imaginative in the way in which we create the stage pictures. The back wall has some various apertures in it, that appear to show you where you are, but the main space is really the movement of three chairs, a table, two beds and a wardrobe that go in different configurations to create quite simple stuff. The actual movement of the set pieces is very much a part of their world.

9) *What about the sound design?*

Max has been here from the start. Particularly creating what is going on inside Elling's head, a lot of the times when Elling will go into a bit of a meltdown he uses these, he blends the train station sequence he blends the real sound of a busy train station he starts to warp and it becomes more unreal and ends with a white noise – (*high pitched demonstration*) kind of ring in it. (*Another filmic device, like a score perhaps?*) It is like a score yes very much that's a good way to put it, it's underneath the production, there seems to be a lot of sound. Every day there are new sounds coming in.

We've got a great device too where we have a radio which is like its own character, and the music can come from the radio onstage and then move and come into the Front-of-House speakers or go the reverse. So helping taking the imaginative world of the play right down into the domestic world of the play.

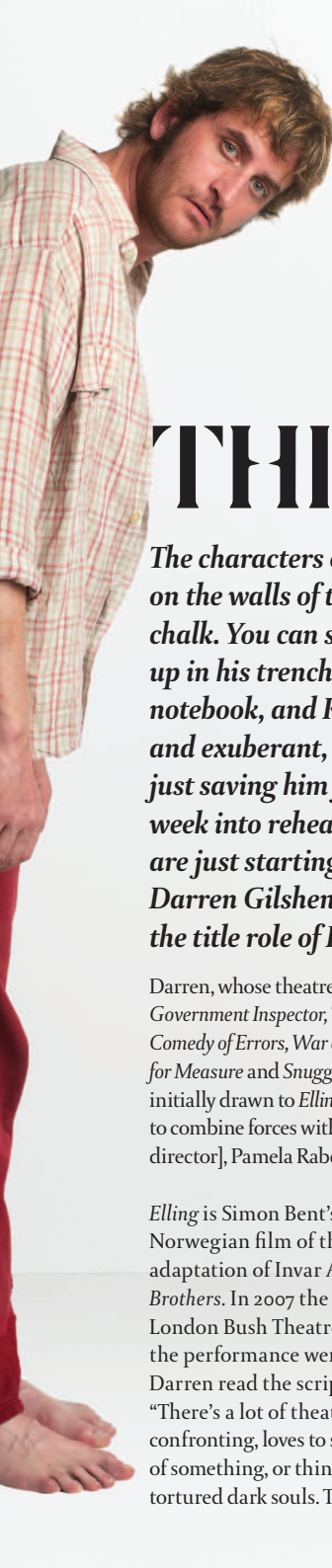
10) *There is something Godot'esque (after Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot) about the situation and as well the characters. Do you see this? However the final scene might leave us much more uplifted – don't you think? Where do*

*you expect to take the audience? Where does 'Elling' go by the conclusion of the play?*

Yes it is a bit Godot like – they are trapped in an apartment for a long period of time doing nothing, waiting, just rotting so in that idea the boredom thing really sets in and drives them crazy. Though I think the audience will get to the end of this play and come out with a big smile on their face, I think they should come out having laughed and with tears in their eyes and thinking wow that was a beautiful piece of theatre that was all about humanity and about who we are and about how important it is for us to find what we're good at, to find love and be loved, to connect to the world and not feel as though we're just islands but that we're actually connected to a greater thing. So it's a very pro-existence piece.

From the beginning its an enormous journey because you meet two people who are just like 'grrrrr', just not wanting to relate to anyone, they are both their own islands and then as the play goes they become beautiful friends and I think Elling's journey ultimately he learns to let go of his friend and that comes from being comfortable within himself and knowing he's not going to be left alone. He grows up, he grows into a man. When he's discovered in the beginning he's probably got the emotional maturity of a twelve year old or less and then by the end of the play he becomes a man. He learns to allow his friend go and be a father and be loved and just as importantly he discovers his own passion which is poetry and through his poetry he discovers expression and all the way through he is writing in a book, which starts with obscene rants at the world turns into a template for beautiful thoughts reflected at the world around him that he gifts to the world. It starts in here and ends up at the stars; we've got a scene at the end we're in a cabin where he says a poem up to the stars about his lot in life. It is a beautiful notion that art - poetry in this case – is a wonderful avenue of expression for human nature. Elling does it within this play and this play does it from the outside of that little guy to the audience hopefully.





# THE ODD COUPLE

**The characters of *Elling* are sketched on the walls of the rehearsal room in chalk. You can see *Elling*, buttoned up in his trench coat clutching a notebook, and Kjell Bjarne, pantless and exuberant, a long, loose shirt just saving him from obscenity. “One week into rehearsals the possibilities are just starting to unfold,” says Darren Gilshenan, who is taking on the title role of *Elling*.**

Darren, whose theatre credits include *The Government Inspector*, *The Servant of Two Masters*, *Comedy of Errors*, *War of The Roses*, *Henry IV*, *Measure for Measure* and *Snugglepot and Cuddlepie*, was initially drawn to *Elling* for one reason: “the chance to combine forces with the creative energy of [the director], Pamela Rabe.”

*Elling* is Simon Bent’s adaptation of the cult Norwegian film of the same name, which is an adaptation of Invar Ambjorsen’s novel *Blood Brothers*. In 2007 the first season of *Elling* at the London Bush Theatre was a sell-out success and the performance went on to the West End. When Darren read the script he was entranced. “There’s a lot of theatre that loves to be confronting, loves to show the dark perverse nature of something, or thinks it’s fashionable to show tortured dark souls. This is a play that is really just

beautiful – it’s like watching a flower just hit the sun and open up... Without trying to sound too hippie about the whole thing it really exercises your human feeling rather than simply deals with ideas or concepts.”

*Elling* is a story about friendship between *Elling*, the buttoned up fantasist, who flinches when there is a knock on the door and Kjell Bjarne, the aging virgin who spends his days imagining the moment of consummation. Released from the asylum, the archetypal odd couple, *Elling* and Kjell, must fend for themselves in a state-supported flat in Oslo. Under the watchful eye of Frank, the social worker, the two men must show that they can live independent lives.

“You warm to the characters straight away; the characters have enormous heart... As they head out of the institution the audience is initially sitting there thinking ‘God, we wish you the best’, and the wonderful thing about the play is that there is a fantastic tension all the way through, where you are waiting for it to go terribly wrong because these innocents are released into the world - into an uncaring, self-obsessed, hungry world - so you’re waiting for them to be eaten up by it. That’s the wonderful tension in the piece – I won’t say how it turns out but when I first read through it, I kept thinking, ‘Will they survive, when is [disaster] coming?’”

*Elling* is a very funny play, but Darren says that the director (Pamela Rabe) and the cast



(joining Darren is Glenn

Hazeldine, Lachy Hulme, Yael Stone, Frank Whitten) are not approaching the play as a comedy. It is not, Darren emphasizes, a slapstick production that patronises or pokes fun at the mentally ill. The characters have problems, yes, but they are problems which are common: anxiety, depression, and agoraphobia.

“These characters have to be very real, believably afflicted people and not us getting cheap laughs by walking around twitching and making the illness the thing that gets the laugh”. Avoiding any hint of mockery is something the cast is “keeping an eye on,” says Darren. “It’s something we’ll have to watch particularly when we get into the theatre and you’re hearing that laughter – the animal inside you thinks, ‘Oh, I want more of that’ – but we need to keep reminding ourselves that that is not the strength of the play; the strength of the play is its heart, not its comedy.

“The line between comedy and tragedy is paper thin. The comedy will naturally come out of the situation, and the situation is based on pain and truth; it’s based on struggle. They are the best places to start any kind of comedy; having done lots of comedy over the years I never walk into a role or onto a stage thinking right, I’ve got to get laughs tonight. It is always about character – the audience has to know who you are first; how you see the world.”

So what techniques has Darren used to create the character of *Elling* – the clever, obsessive (secretly poetic) mummy’s boy? “It is the last thing I’m ever asked about and for me it is the most fascinating

question – how do you create a character?”

“*Elling* is an intellectual character – he over-thinks everything to the state of inaction. He plays out scenarios in his head before he even gets out of the cupboard. When I look at a character like that I always think of where a character sits within the body. If you imagine lower in your body”, Darren’s voice drops an octave, “the characters that are sexually driven will come from there, whereas characters with a voracious appetite might be further up in the stomach.”

“Then you move up to the heart, where the heroes come from. The emotions are generally held in the throat. Then you get up towards the brain”. Darren raises his voice so it is high-pitched and almost querulous. “So for me, just by the idea of placing my voice up towards my brain and working with that part of my body is the starting point for creating a character that over-thinks.”

While Darren knows the audience is unlikely to notice his voice subtly shifting in register as *Elling* begins to envision life as a poet, “emotionally they will sense a shift”. The observant theatre-goer may also notice how the gait of *Elling*’s walk lengthens, his language becomes more lyrical, and his hands stop covering his heart and his mouth. All these subtle shifts in language, movement, and register, reveal a man slowly learning to embrace life.

“*Elling* starts frozen: having been abducted and thrown into an institution when his mother died. On the outside he is like a block of ice that is gradually melting...” says Darren. As anxieties dissolve, *Elling* begins to discover the poetry in life, and in himself. This then, is what *Elling* is ultimately about: feeling free to embrace the real without letting go of the imaginary.

Frances Simmons

Sydney Theatre Company is association with Ambassador Theatre Group present *Elling* playing from 30 May in Wharf 1.

