



Sydney Theatre Company and the Sydney Morning Herald present

# **The Removalists**

**by David Williamson**  
**Directed by Wayne Blair**

## **Teacher's Resource Kit**

Written and compiled by Robyn Edwards and Samantha Kosky

## CONTEMPORARY AUDIENCE | "You don't usually come home on Friday nights."

"Thirty-seven years on, David Williamson's classic play maintains its startling power."

### Post-Production Analysis:

Consider your experience of this 1970's text.

How well has Wayne Blair, the director, succeeded in captivating you as a contemporary audience? What made you laugh? Cringe? What made you look away? Why?

The convention for the actor audience relationship in Realism is the '4<sup>th</sup> wall' where the audience passively watches the characters and engages emotionally or emphatically with their experiences.

Does Williamson adhere to this convention in the play *The Removalists* and what choices does Blair make to support or contradict this convention in performance? Where were you positioned as audience – peering through the invisible '4<sup>th</sup> wall' into the world of the characters where you felt for them and experienced some of what they were going through OR were you emotionally outside the action, distanced from the characters emotionally, judging their actions?

Consider the directors choices (such as staging) and discuss what evoked this actor-audience relationship? Can you distinguish between the craft of the director and playwright in evoking this reaction?

## DRAMATIC ACTION AND CHARACTERISATION | interrupted rituals

### Rehearsal Workshop:

Create a tableau of the following images from the play in which you capture the characters' physicality and emotional state:

- Simmonds at the station with his feet on the desk [enter Ross];
- Fiona at the ironing board [enter Kenny];
- Simmonds laying into Kenny [arrival of the Removalist];
- examining Fiona's bruises [Ross begins to photograph].

Identify the rituals of each of the characters at this moment in the play and begin this stage action. Continue this action until the entrance of the other character. In response to the other character, the ritual action must be changed in some way. Experiment with altering the rhythm, tempo, focus and/or structure of the ritual.

In these examples, how do ritual actions and the environment in which they occur reveal character?

The interruption of ritual communicates the idea that the predictable, old ways of these characters no longer work. Importantly, this technique also creates dramatic action and tension as the audience is drawn into to observing HOW the character attempts to deal with the shift of power and balance.

Rehearse the given scenes, keeping the ideas above in mind. Make bold physical choices where the character entering "gets in the way" and impedes the habitual actions. Add dialogue with the objective to pursue your ritual and comfort zone. What tactics came into play? Where was the tension and what created it? At what point as the actor where you confronted with a weakness in the character you were playing? As audience were there times when you felt yourself judging or empathising with a character? What were you reacting to?

**Directing workshop:**

Taking what you have observed and revealed about the characters, choose one of the scenarios to direct and perform using the full text. Make clear the characters' inner conflict that arises from being challenged to interrupt their rituals of behaviour and thought, and their reluctance to do that.

**Post-workshop discussion:**

What have you come to understand about the "old" characters and the "new" ways? Did these moments go beyond revealing character and creating tension to provide insight into the playwright's portrayal of a particular social and historical context?

## **SOCIAL CONTEXT | "if a man didn't give his wife a thrashing every week ...."**

Visit the Sydney Theatre Company website to access the pages on *The Removalists*. Read the Rehearsal Diary, paying attention to the photos from rehearsals.

<http://www.sydneytheatre.com.au/downloads/Removalists%20Rehearsal%20Diary.pdf>

Just last Tuesday around half a dozen of us including Jacob Nash (Designer), Tanya Leach (Stage Manager), Terri Richards (Production Manager) and myself, circled around a cut piece of test linoleum, earnestly looking at things that make it dirty, things that make it clean, how they make it dirty, how they make it clean. So many questions about a piece of Australian homemaker history.

Jessica Tuckwell, Rehearsal Diary  
Monday 29 Dec 2008 (Week 1 - Day 1)

**Post-production workshop:**

Using the photos from the program and the website as a reference, how does the domestic setting of the play's second act support Williamson's exploration of the changing roles of men and women in the 1970's? What is symbolic in the rehearsal process about "looking at things that make it dirty"?

Without getting into a larger debate it can safely be said that the world of *The Removalists* is not one where women are empowered .... [Rehearsal Diary, Day 1] ... This afternoon's topic is sexual innuendo. Is Kate Mason a psycho-sexual fruit-cake? How cringeworthy do we want the Sergeant to be when checking Fiona's bruises? The moments are big and small in the same breath.

Jessica Tuckwell, Rehearsal Diary  
Tuesday 6 January 2009 (Week 2)

### **Rehearsal Workshop**

The changing social roles and views of men and women are explored cleverly through contradiction – between what the characters say from one moment to the next, between what a character says and does, and in what is said about a character's past and what they are currently doing.

For example; Simmons bitterly reveals Kate's affair, reprimands Kenny "can't talk to women like that" and demands an apology on her behalf; and later offers Kenny prostitutes.

In groups select ONE character as your focus such as Kate, Fiona, Kenny OR Simmons and identify 4 to 5 contradictory views or actions from the script in relation to the character's perspective on men and women. The whole group presents their findings to the class as performance, making staging choices that clearly communicate the fact that within one person there are different, changeable views. There is no black and white.

## DRAMATIC STRUCTURE | “... machinery tickin’ over out there in the drive.”

*If an intermission is required it can be taken here. If not slides of the family life of ROSS and FIONA can be shown. ROSS with his proud family in his uniform. ROSS with Marilyn at last year’s company ball. FIONA with KENNY and the babies. KATE holding FIONA’s baby etc.*

### **Post Performance Reflection:**

Blair’s production runs 1 hour 30 minutes without interval and the transition from Act One to Act Two is marked by a display of slides as suggested by Williamson’s script, but these ‘slides’ are presented in the form of human tableaux.

In assistant director, Jessica Tuckwell’s rehearsal diary, she writes, “it’s already been decided we won’t have an interval and Wayne wants to use it to tell an unwritten part of the story, which the original script suggest as a series of family photographs.”

Class to brainstorm moments that occurred before the play begins in the life of each character. In quick timed succession, teacher calls out these moments and groups create them in tableaux. Each group is to select 3 focusing on an unwritten part of ONE character’s story and present these to the class.

In the production, what mood was created on stage in the ‘human slide show’ presented? What was the impact of this on building tension at the end of Act 1? In your experience did the slides intensify it, change it or have no impact on the atmosphere created at the end of Act 1?

As an audience, what impact does the ‘human slide show have’ on the unrelenting tension and on our understanding? Do the tableaux provide a reprieve in the pace or to do they heighten it?

### **Post-Production workshop:**

You have heard rumours that the actors are unhappy to use the slides; they would rather have an interval. In role as the director, you must convince your actors that the production is better served running with the slides as a transition and without interval.

## DRAMATIC TECHNIQUE | Off stage action

### **Post-Production Analysis:**

One of the conventions of Naturalism is the convention that the characters and their world continue to exist beyond the realistic stage placed before us.

What theatrical techniques were used to complete and extend the reality of the characters in their world for you as an audience member? When did this happen? How was it created? Was it believable?

## LANGUAGE | verbal and physical

*The visceral and hollow feeling that we are left with after witnessing a violent act is something worth exploring within the context of this production. Williamson provides an ideal platform for us to explore this. Indeed his text demands it.*

*Fight choreography ... it is a major element of the story. It's a whole other physical language in the play.*

### **Rehearsal Workshop:**

The narrative is revealed through both dialogue and physical language. While the dialogue is realistic the physical language is not.

Were you ever afraid for the actors safety because you were conscious that characters were played by actors or did directional choreography choices bring a confidence in the dynamic and shocking tension?

In pairs, develop your own physical language of fighting. Find 3 non-literal physical actions with a corresponding reaction that manipulate pace, proximity, and levels. Using these as your language, devise a sequence where violence is communicated but there is no physical contact. The physical language should be a new way of communicating aggression towards each other; one makes an offer and the other responds.

Encourage students to go beyond conventional gestures for their fight to genuinely find a new language for fighting between the two characters. It may take on a dance-like quality in some ways.

### **Post-Production Workshop:**

As a result of this workshop experience, what do you imagine is required of the actors in this rehearsal process to make this fight language convincing in performance?

Consult the notes from the fight choreographer on the STC website for the production. What are the challenges of staging fights and creating dramatic tension through physical action?

Evaluate the success of the fight choreography in *The Removalists* in relation to:

- its impact on the audience
- its communication of violence, tension, mood and atmosphere

## THEMATIC CONCERNS | Power Play

*David Williamson's hard hitting play, is primarily concerned with "the corruption and abuse of power and how people play games with each other for their own subversive reasons."*

*[Blair's director's notes]*

### **Improvisational Workshop:**

Students bring an item/prop of "value" to the classroom. Working in pairs, one student presents through demonstration and dialogue, the object and its value to their partner. Player B asks for the object and Player A submits. Player A must then explore a range of actions and strategies to retrieve their object. Players are limited to the dialogue of "Can I have it back now?" and "No." The emphasis should be on listening, reacting and pursuing an objective despite obstacles.

### **Post-workshop discussion:**

Discuss the dramatic tension and the experience of Player A versus B. What feelings about power and justice were aroused in you? Did the focus shift between the object and the players? Discuss several dramatic moments and explore why these shifts occurred?

### **Rehearsal Workshop:**

RESOURCE: Policeman's hat or object/hat of power and status and text: Act 2 p111

Ross begins wearing policeman's cap until Simmonds enters with a worried look on his face, takes the hat and says, "What'd you do to him?" Play until Ross says, "We could make it look like he committed suicide" with the characters vying for status through possession of the hat. At all times the players' objective is to have the hat, and hence status. The player holding or wearing the hat must be true to its symbolic power and endow their lines with that power at all times.

### **Post-workshop discussion:**

How was your delivery affected by the status you held? Did your pitch, pace and tone change and what was communicated about the character by these changes? As an audience member, at what moments were you most engaged in the performances presented by your peers?

### **Post-Production discussion:**

In Blair's production, how did the staging of this moment clearly communicate the shifts and tussle for power in the play? How were various elements of drama such as movement, space, tension manipulated to engage the audience?

## DIRECTORIAL CHOICES | profiling a practitioner

It would seem that the rehearsals are for answering questions. It also raises a million more, some of which can be answered by us, but others which will ultimately be answered by the audience.

Rehearsal Diary  
Tuesday 13 Jan Week 3 Day 2

### Rehearsal Workshop:

In groups choose one practitioner, from whose perspective you are to approach the rehearsal and staging of one of the following scenes:

- Kate's confrontation with Simmonds
- ironing scene
- Simmonds' and Ross' final confrontation

Whilst not all scenes are suitable to be directed through all approaches it does provide the opportunity to explore through contrast the impact of directorial and stylistic choices on text.

Practitioners: Vsevelod Meyerhold, Constantine Stanislavski, Rudolf Laban; Bertolt Brecht (and his "He said, she said" technique)

Use the techniques of the chosen practitioner to explore:

- elements of drama such as space, levels and proxemics; rhythm and pace; focus and tension
- layers of meaning in dialogue to communicate intention, ideas and power
- energy, dynamics and relationships between characters
- impact of dialogue and movement on audience, mood and atmosphere

### Post-Rehearsal Discussion:

Which interpretation did you most connect with? What questions about the text, the characters and the dramatic tension and Williamson's intentions did the approach of your practitioner raise? What answers did you find? What feedback did your peers give you? What results from this workshop would you take into your direction of a production of *The Removalists*?



## DESIGN | "... like the furniture ... said it made him want to vomit."

Wayne sees the simple approach of the design as highlighting the language of the play; letting the script "do a bit of the work in telling the audience this story ... Hopefully our production can retain the immediacy and truth such a small space would have provided but still get the story across to twelve times the capacity.

### **Set design workshop:**

For a production of *The Removalists*, the director has asked for a minimalistic set design with a maximum of 4 items with transformational possibilities. Considering the locations required on stage, what 4 items would you choose and why? Discuss how the items are transformed to evoke the different locations. Within your design give consideration to the Australian context and how this can be communicated.

EXTENSION: In groups, students could physically represent or provide visuals of their design to the class supported by discussion. The presentation should include one example of transformation that occurs in the play.

### **Post-Production Analysis:**

Discuss the effectiveness of Jacob Nash's minimalist design for the production in relation to:

- actor's playing space
- revealing characters
- physical demands of the script
- contemporary audience