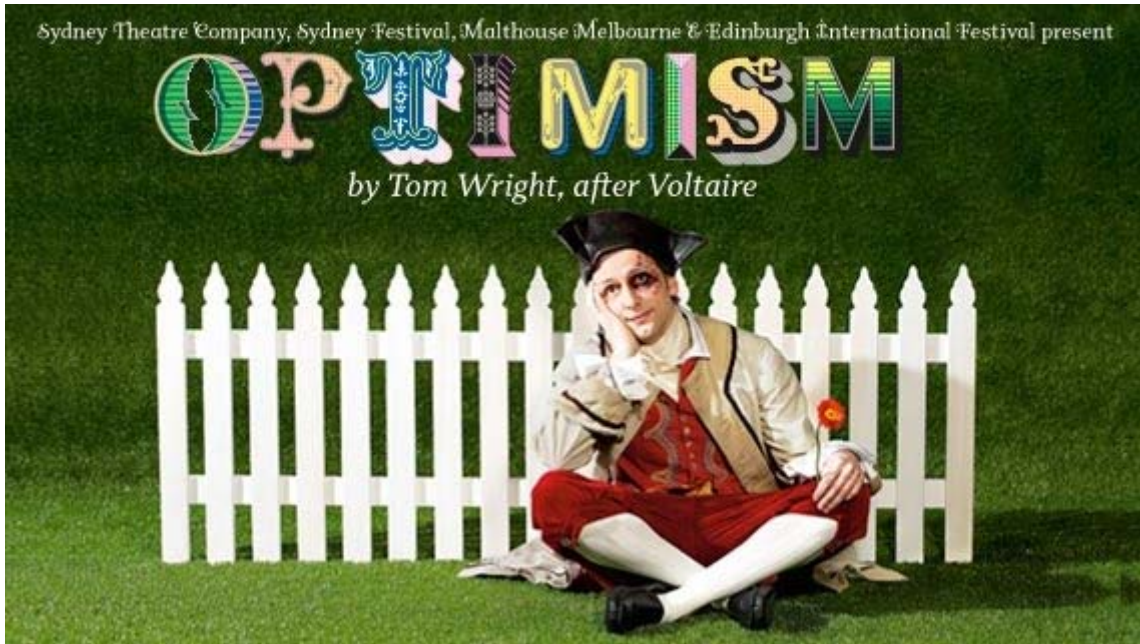




Teacher Resources - Pre-Show OPTIMISM



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Teacher's Resource Kit compiled by:

Education Manager: **Naomi Edwards** Education Coordinator: **Toni Murphy** Editor: **Lucy Goleby**

Contributors: Malthouse Theatre, STC Ed

OPTIMISM

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Background on the Production from Malthouse Theatre

Synopsis

Briefly...

OPTIMISM explores the myth of positive thinking in a world gone horribly wrong. Think Green, act Black and carry an oxygen mask wherever you go. In short - be optimistic.

Raised in Westphalia in the household of a Baron, Candide (Frank Woodley) has enjoyed a privileged life. He has received a fine education in philosophy from the family tutor, Pangloss (Barry Otto), and has merrily subscribed to his mentor's theory that 'all is for the best'. Life has been all-too-easy for our blissfully happy hero. That is until his love for the Baron's rosy-cheeked daughter, Cunegonde, is detected and, by way of punishment, he is ejected from this Eden.

Here begins Candide's extraordinary and epic journey around the globe. An adventure of unbridled enthusiasm under the weight of climate change, third world exploitation, rampaging consumerist waste and the threat of theologically-inspired terrorism. The world he experiences is cruel and frequently brutal... Will it chip away at his insatiable optimism?

Tom Wright transforms Voltaire's classic satire, *Candide*, into a cutting commentary on the no-worries bravura of the Australian swagger.

Cast and Creatives

Creative Team

Tom Wright - Writer/Adapter
Michael Kantor - Director
Anna Tregloan - Designer
Iain Grandage - Composer & Performer
Paul Jackson - Lighting Designer
Russell Goldsmith - Sound Designer
Luke George - Choreographer
Claire Bourke - Stage Manager
Dylan Young - Besen (Composition)
Sarah Giles - Assistant Director (STC)

Cast

Caroline Craig - Cunegonde
Francis Greenslade - Cacambo
Amber McMahon - Paquette
Hamish Michael - Brother Girofleo
Barry Otto - Pangloss
Alison Whyte - Abigail
Frank Woodley - Candide
David Woods - Martin

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Background on the Production from Malthouse Theatre

Themes and Concepts

- | | | | |
|--------------|------------|--------------|------------|
| - Love | - Violence | - Ignorance | - Optimism |
| - Philosophy | - Thinking | - Friendship | - Humanity |

Things to consider when watching *Optimism*:

- An over arching theme of this production is that of happiness. How is happiness explored? What types of happiness? Happiness for whom or what?
- What does the production of OPTIMISM say about happiness in comparison to the script or the original musings of Voltaire?
- Is either Voltaire or Tom Wright saying that ‘we certainly cannot count on human kindness...but we cannot absolutely count on human betrayal either’?
- How does Candide himself define happiness?

Historical Context – The Enlightenment Period

“The Enlightenment was an age of optimism, strengthened by the realization of the sad state of the human condition and the need for major reforms. It was a period in which thinkers believed that humanity, through the use of reason, was beginning to gain ownership and control over the world. However, with the Enlightenment came the destruction of the old fixed order. This new age of thinking and reason made people not only start to question their everyday lives, but their existence as a whole. Before the Enlightenment one’s reason for existing was determined by the Church, but with the surfacing of Darwin’s theory of evolution, Martin Luther’s ninety-five theses against the establishment of the Church and England creating their own Church separate from Rome’s, people started to question everything they had been taught.”

“Science not only opened the eyes of many in theological matters but it also help make advances in medicine, agriculture, and architecture. These advances provided cures to diseases, more food and better shelter, which, in turn, caused the population to explode and we became a mass society. As a mass society our behaviour had changed. We had been, at one time, spiritual beings; the Enlightenment changed us into beings of science, by driving us into its arms. We also fell into the trap of phoney individualism. We all thought that we were different and unique, because of relativism, we all had our different opinions, but in reality we were all driven by the same thing, consumerism. The sudden attachment to all of our possessions and our materialistic values changed our behaviour. We went from an individualistic society, to a narcissistic one.”

The excerpts above were taken from the website below:

<http://www.exampleessays.com/viewpaper/21300.html>

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Background on the Production from Malthouse Theatre

Contemporary Context

The simple theme of Voltaire's classic novel, "Candide" is a wry, at times sarcastic demolition of the great canard of the era; that the world is benevolent, that all creation serves humanity's needs, that this is as good as it gets, and if things seem malign, it is through our failings. In short, Optimism, which is also the subtitle of the work.

We seem now to be entering a new era of doubting contention between the free marketeers who would assure us that all is for the best, and the naysayers groaning under the weight of climate change, third world exploitation, rampaging consumerist waste and the threat of theologically-inspired terrorism. But there's more.

Optimism is a picaresque ramble, a road movie. It moves across all continents and through a multitude of moods. It is a dream as much as anything; it is modern rationalism telling itself a fairy-tale. It has within it religion, Utopia, sex, disease, philosophy. It's a mess. It's wonderful.

At once a broad, red-faced burlesque and a keen dissection of the foibles of human longing, Optimism turns a hilarious eye to the woes of the heart. Reeking with scandal and scurrilous vice, it transforms Voltaire's classic satire of enlightened insanity into a cutting commentary on the no-worries bravura of the Australian swagger.

Further Reading

"**Candide**" by Voltaire - translated and edited by Theo Cuffe, with an Afterward by Michael Wood, Published by the Penguin Group, 2005

Michel de Montaigne's essay "**Des Cannibales**", book 1, chapter 30

Shakespeare's "**THE TEMPEST**"

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Pre-Performance Activities from STC Ed

The following activities are designed to get students to connect with their own feelings and ideas about the central idea of the play, Optimism and to explore the comedic exaggeration (physical as well as verbal) that is a stylistic feature of this production.

Fortunately/Unfortunately

Aim: Students connect on a personal level with the themes of the play.

In pairs students improvise a narrated story about a journey they are taking.

One student begins sentences with Fortunately, the other with Unfortunately.

E.g. 1 "Fortunately I woke up very early on the morning I was scheduled to leave"

2 "Unfortunately I fell straight back asleep"

3 "Fortunately I awoke with just enough time to make my flight"

4 "Unfortunately the flight was delayed and I had to wait at the airport for another 2 hours"

Etc.

Students then swap roles. Discuss how it felt to be in each position – did one feel easier/harder/better/worse than another?

Is your natural instinct to be optimistic or pessimistic? What do you think about each way of viewing the world?

Half empty/Half full...

Aim: Students connect on a personal level with the themes of the play within scenework.

Students introduced practically to form as at work in the play.

In pairs students improvise the following scene:

2 people are waiting for a bus that is running late. 1 is an optimist the other is a pessimist.

Extend the activity:

What happens if?

- Add age to the equation. The optimist is older the pessimist younger. Then swap.
- Play the same scene as a comedy then play the scene as a tragedy.

Discuss how it felt to be in each position – was there a combination that felt easier/harder/better worse than another?

Was there a style (comic/tragic) that highlighted a particular point of view better?

Did comedy bring out the optimist or pessimist better? What about tragedy?

What did you notice in watching others scenes?

Is your natural instinct to be optimistic or pessimistic? What do you think about each way of viewing the world?

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Physical Hyperbole

Aim: Students introduced practically to form as at work in the play – in particular the physicality of comedy and clowning.

This activity is designed to get students used to the physical hyperbole and comedy that clowning can entail and to introduce them physically to melodrama. It can be done one student at a time, or with each student taking turns.

- Start small
A student mimes simply killing a small spider
- Extending on the offer
Imagine that each attempt at killing the spider is unsuccessful – try something bigger. Each attempt at killing the spider becomes bigger, grander, more exaggerated, more ludicrous – think outside the box – how creatively can this be done? (Don't forget that the mime must still be detailed and clear even as it gets more exaggerated)
- Resuscitation
Once the killing physicality has become as big and outrageous as possible (and then some) start to bring the spider back to life. Again, start small and become grander and more exaggerated and creative.

OPTIMISM

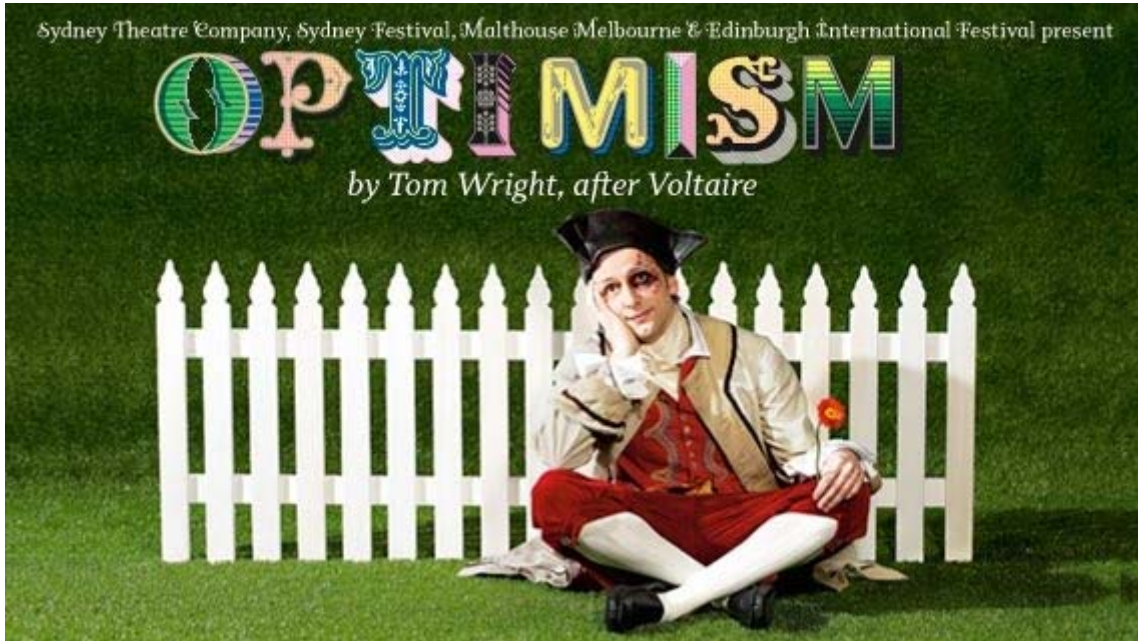
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Teacher Resources - Post-Show OPTIMISM



These Teacher Resources contain:

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Teacher Resources compiled by:

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“
...all is, in the end,
”
for the *best*.

- Pangloss, *Optimism*

Definitions of Optimism

1. The belief that events will improve

2. The belief that everything that occurs leads to, or is part of, a greater good, and that all things move to improvement. So, a bough of a tree falling on your car might seem like a negative occurrence. But if it prevents you causing a six car pile up five minutes later it is actually part of a greater plan, one we can never know. This implies that something like the Haiti earthquake, horrifying and redolent with suffering as it is, is part of some big scheme to improve the

universe that we're too small and blind to see.

3. The belief that since God created the world this must be the best of all *possible* worlds (Leibniz).

4. The belief that, since we can't know what the future holds, the presumption that it will be 'good' makes the present more enjoyable (existential optimism)

5. The active philosophy that we should try to make the most of every stroke of good fortune; we should 'optimise' our opportunities, insure them against future downturns (this is bizzarely *pessimistic optimism*). e.g. the ants as opposed to the grasshopper, who was a *fatalistic optimist*.

6. The cognitive practice of deciding that events in an individual's life are positive, healthy, spiritually enriching, useful, utilitarian etc, regardless of how bad they might be. ('positive thought')

7. The focus on what is available, and not on what has been lost. On what can be achieved and not on what cannot. (therefore, *pragmatic optimism* as opposed to *idealism*)

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Activity – Optimism

Aim: Students explore the central theme in practice

*In groups of four to five, creating a scene in which one character holds this optimistic view of the world while the characters hold the opposite view.

*Play the scene again where the central optimistic character attempts to convince the others of his or her perspective.

*Play the scene again and this time the optimistic character's perspective is changed by the other characters.

Dramatic Form

Malthouse Theatre & STC Ed

Clowning –

Read the interviews with Playwright Director, Designer and Actors on the STC Ed website. Michael Kantor, Anna Tregloan, Caroline Craig and Frank Woodley all talk about the concept of 'clowning' in referring to the style of the work. What aspects of the performance would you regard as having a basis in clowning?

Activity - Fortunately/Unfortunately

Aim: Students connect on a personal level with the themes of the play within scenework. Students are introduced practically to form as at work in the play - in particular the physicality of clowning.

The violence in Optimism is quite extreme.

Play Fortunately/Unfortunately from the pre show activities.

Challenge the actor with the unfortunately to make their offers more and more horrendous, challenging the Fortunately player to find the positive.

Extension – challenge players to physicalise the events in their story, exploring clowning and slapstick.

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Sound & Music

There are a number of songs that have been composed for the production. How did you respond to the use of song in the piece? How was song used to further the story?

How was the song and music used in performance manipulated to evoke emotion and/or heighten contrast and/or create mood?

Activity - Direct Address

Aim: Students explore form as used in the production – specifically direct address and song.

In partners, Player A tells Player B a story of a fanciful journey across 5 fictional countries to Player B, in first person in character. The story must be told as a series of events.

Player B then tells the same story back to Player A, but Player A can clap once at any point. On the single clap, Player A must, as the protagonist, reflect on the journey thus far and relate their experiences of the journey to the audience. Once Player A's monologue is complete, Player B continues with the narrative.

If Player A claps twice, Player B must break out into song that captures the feeling in the story at that moment.

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Activity - Setting as Metaphor

Aim: Students explore the relationship between the narrative and set design.

Michael Kantor describes flying in aeroplanes the most optimistic act in modern day society. The aeroplane is a reflects the concept of optimism, while also serving the narrative of the epic journey.

Brainstorm other ideas for setting for this piece that capture both the concept of Optimism and the narrative demands of the epic journey.

Explain your concept as though you are the director briefing your design team at the beginning of a production process.

**Activity – Costume & Clowning**

Aim: Students Explore the references within the costume design.

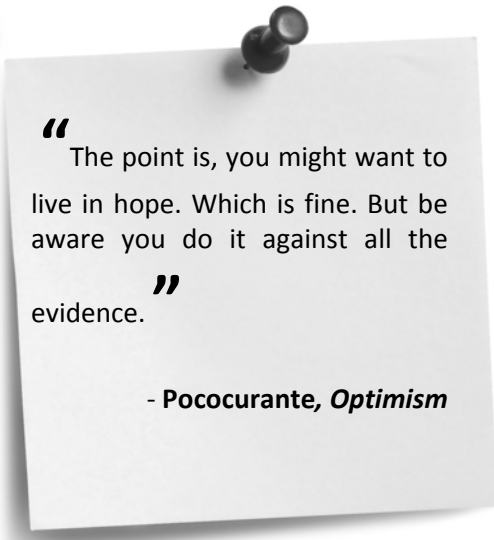
Anna Tregloan's costume designs draw on a variety of theatrical references including circus and clowning. Using the image above, identify the different types of clowns, performers and characters across a variety of theatrical traditions that she is referencing. Justify her choice to draw on each of these references in relation to a contemporary audience.

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“
The point is, you might want to live in hope. Which is fine. But be aware you do it against all the
”
evidence.

- **Pococurante, *Optimism***

Questions to Stimulate Discussion, Logbook entries or Essay Topics:

1. How do you respond to the world that is created in this production of OPTIMISM? What is familiar? What do you recognise? Does it seem real or highly exaggerated? What contemporary resonances do you think the play has?
2. Compare Eldorado and Westphalia with versions of Utopia presented over time through literature and plays. Is Eldorado the ‘fictional illusion that represents the historical hope’?
3. How true is the statement that “Satires don’t correct anyone, but some readers may find their mingled horror and laughter suggest work for them to do. That would be their garden.”
4. “Everything in the world is for the best” How does OPTIMISM explore/expose this philosophical position?
5. Is it possible to be optimistic in a world of war, climate change and financial crisis? How does the production of OPTIMISM reflect this age-old question?

Activity - The Optimistic Newspaper

Aim: To challenge students to explore the central theme in a different form.

Take the Front page of the Newspaper of the day.

Students re-write the newspaper front page by creating an optimistic version of the days events.

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