



# People of the Soil Project

2010

## Teacher Resource Pack



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## People of the Soil Project

### Introduction

*People of the Soil Project* is a package of activities structured around the performance of STC and Zeal Theatre's production of *BURNT*. Designed for students, teacher and the broader local community, *People of The Soil Project* tours to rural communities severely affected by dryness in mid 2010. Sydney Theatre Company is partnering with the Drought Mental Health Assistance Program, the NSW Department of Education and Training and the University of Technology, Sydney, to tour this program. The project aims to support the discussions and reflections that the play will bring to the surface for its audiences. Live performance is a powerful medium to explore issues and themes that are embedded in a community. STC's objective for *The People Of The Soil Project* is to lessen isolation by engaging communities in the shared experience of attending theatre.

### Overview

In 2009 Sydney Theatre Company (STC) commissioned Tom Lycos and Stefo Nantsou of STC Associate Company, Zeal Theatre, to research and develop a new theatrical play based on the social impact of prolonged dryness in regional Australian communities. This new play is entitled *Burnt*.

*Burnt* was researched and developed with communities in order that the play be an accurate and meaningful reflection of life for families who live in parts of Australia that are coping with prolonged dryness.

Accompanying this touring production is an integrated program of pre and post performance drama based workshops with STC artists for secondary students, mental health training for teachers delivered by UTS and the Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health and an evening performance for the broader local community, accompanied with post show Q&A sessions.

The aims of the *People of the Soil Project* are:

- Reducing the feelings of isolation by socially bringing communities and families together around a performance;
- Opening up new avenues for discussion sharing common experiences of how severe dryness is affecting particular communities, families and school children;
- Investing in a unique programme of professional development for teachers and their students in regional schools;
- Equipping audiences with information and recommended pathways that link rural communities to existing support networks and services in times of stress;
- Facilitating the sharing of local stories through the use of theatre;
- Celebrating the resilience and unique qualities of regional and rural communities;
- Providing regional and rural students with a rare extra-curricular opportunity to engage with Sydney Theatre Company artists and develop their own skills in Drama and English.

STC is offering a unique approach to supporting regional communities and schools. We are extremely pleased with the positive momentum the project is generating as we work to link in with a variety of different areas that are able to meaningfully contribute to the *People of the Soil Project*. It has captured many imaginations.

## Project Outline

For your school, the People of The Soil Project spans approximately an 8 week period from the pre performance and mental health workshops, through to the performance and ending with the post show workshop with your students. It is envisaged that teachers may incorporate the creation of their own versions of *Burnt* into their drama, English or media curriculum. Included in this pack is a term's lesson plans, for you to use with your senior drama and English students.

### **Phase 1          Pre-performance**

Prior to seeing the performance of *Burnt*, students will engage in preliminary drama activities designed to 'turn on' their minds and imagination to drama with STC artists. For some students *Burnt* will be their first experience of seeing a play.

In partnership with schools, teachers would participate in dynamic tailored mental health workshops presented by the Drought Mental Health Assistance Program, designed to support teachers' ability to identify depression and anxiety in their students.

### **Phase 2          The Performance**

*Burnt* is performed for both schools and the broader community. The play has been crafted so it can be performed in almost any kind of space - from theatres to school halls, sporting clubs, community halls or even a shearing shed. At the end of each performance there will be a Q&A hosted by the actors with Mental Health Workers present to provide access and information about services available.

Seeing the play will instigate continuing discussion and help individuals and communities identify existing networks and pathways to support themselves now and into the future. Our intention is to create a sensitively facilitated discussion by the actors and a psychologist/support worker plus the distribution of printed material, at all performances.

### **Phase 3          Post Performance**

In the weeks following the performance of *Burnt*, STC artists will return to the school and engage the students and teachers in a follow up drama workshop. In this workshop, students will work with the STC Teaching Artists on the scenes they have created in class. Using the term lesson plans outlined in this pack, students can create their own, localised version of scenes from the play *Burnt* and creatively explore and theatricalise their town's experiences. These can be performed as a whole school event, to their own class or for the STC artists to workshop and develop.

Students will capture these local stories as they are performed for the broader community and share them with other regional communities. This could take the form of filming the new versions of the play and exchanging these performances across communities via STC Ed's website, taking photos, writing stories and reflections.

The Drought Mental Health Assistance Program will continue links with communities forged at the Community performances, providing ongoing professional support as part of their current programs.

## Partnership

Sydney Theatre Company is partnered with Drought Mental Health Assistance Program , NSW Department of Education and Training, University of Technology Sydney, NSW Health, and regional performing arts centres, Albury Entertainment Centre, Wagga Wagga Civic Theatre, Griffith Regional Theatre and Art Gallery to deliver this project.

## Touring Locations

Sydney Theatre Company is working with Drought Mental Health Assistance Program to identify areas most in need of the project, targeting drought affected areas in NSW's regional areas. It is an aim of the project to visit towns and areas that, due to their remote location, would not normally access arts based projects or mental health services.

## Future Objectives

Sydney Theatre Company plans to continue the project into 2011 with another tour of regional NSW, continuing and expanding the People of The Soil Project into new areas and returning to communities we have worked with.

## Contact Details

Naomi Edwards  
Acting Education Manager  
Sydney Theatre Company  
E – nedwards@sydneytheatre.com.au  
T – 02 9250 1726



STC ED Major Patrons  
Ian and Min Darling  
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The People of The Soil Project is presented by Sydney Theatre Company in partnership with the Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health, University of Technology Sydney Health Psychiatry Unit and the NSW Department of Education and Training.  
*BURNT* was originally commissioned by Sydney theatre Company with the support of the Girgensohn Foundation.

## Background to the People Of The Soil Project

After a meeting with the Hon. Tony Burke MP, Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Sydney Theatre Company then met with Peter Kenny, Chairman of the Expert Social Panel's report entitled *It's About People: Changing Perspectives on Dryness* late in 2008. On the encouragement of Peter Kenny, STC proposed a commission to Tom Lycos and Stefo Nantsou of STC Associate Company Zeal Theatre of a new play based on the experiences of the impact of prolonged dryness on regional and rural communities for its 2009 season. STC then obtained philanthropic support in the form of a Commissioning Patron, The Girgensohn Foundation, to ensure the play's development was secure and well resourced.

The research and development for *Burnt*, included extended interviews with Peter Kenny; reviewing various sources of information for example St. Vincent de Paul Society's DVD *"Mate Helping Mate"*; and most importantly workshops were held in regional schools in western NSW. The next phase of the creative development was rehearsals followed by a small 'out of town' tour in South West NSW followed by a two week season at Sydney Theatre Company from 24 June – 3 July. STC has been delighted to share this important story with city audiences; however it is in regional and rural areas where we feel there is a great potential to creatively address some of the key issues around Community, Families and Health and Well Being.

STC formed a partnership with the Health Psychology Unit at University of Technology Sydney, with a view to providing information and training regarding adolescent mental health. After seeing a performance of *Burnt*, a mental health worker from the Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health contacted Sydney Theatre Company, with a view to using the play to connect with communities they were working with in promoting and providing access to mental health services. The Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health, through their Drought Mental Health Assistance Program, the Greater Southern and Greater Western Health Services, came on board the project. These agencies provided significant community consultation and tailoring of the project to the needs of particular areas. The Health Workers, along with the regional performing arts venues, Albury Entertainment Centre, Wagga Wagga Civic Theatre, Griffith Regional Theatre and Art Gallery in the areas have been instrumental in the delivery of this comprehensive project of performances supported by workshops for students and teachers.

## About the play *Burnt*

*Burnt* is set in the fictional town of Gilpendry and explores the Petro family's struggle to keep their property Eureka after several years of dryness. The play opens with a portrait of the family's daily routine from getting off to school, to collecting the necessities from town, attending various meetings and heading home again, although we begin to discover things are not all as they seem as the undercurrent of financial pressure continues to course through the Petro family. As the play continues, cracks caused by the intolerable strain of financial hardship and depression widen for the parents and the children. Do they stay or try to sell up and start over?

The small ensemble of talented actors evokes both an entire town and an intimate family struggle. *Burnt* is told with minimal sets and props, live music and is a showcase of physical theatre at its best.

## About Sydney Theatre Company

Sydney Theatre Company, as the premier theatre company in Australia, has been a major force in Australian drama since its establishment in 1978. The Company presents a comprehensive annual theatrical program at its home base The Wharf, on Sydney's harbour at Walsh Bay, the nearby Sydney Theatre, which STC also manages, and as the resident theatre company of the Sydney Opera House. Current Artistic Directors, Cate Blanchett and Andrew Upton joined the Company at the beginning of 2008. They are passionate advocates for the Company's education program STC Ed and have committed to an ambitious programme of expansion for the Company's work in this area.

## About STC Ed

Since 1987 Sydney Theatre Company has presented productions, outreach programs and workshops specifically for school audiences. Within the STC Ed programme we produce a season of plays as well as collaborate with leading theatre-for-young-people companies across Australia.

Often a young person's first experience of theatre is facilitated by teachers. STC Ed ensures access to all of its Main Stage productions through the Schools Day programme as well as producing and touring theatre specifically crafted to resonate with young people. It is vital that students engage with work of the highest quality. Art can expand children's view of the world and encourage innovative, engaged thinking and compassion.

For more information visit: [www.sydneytheatre.com.au/stced](http://www.sydneytheatre.com.au/stced)

## About Zeal Theatre

Zeal Theatre is a small company producing outstanding original theatre performances. Zeal Theatre are constantly invited to perform in schools and festivals in Australia and have performed in most major children's festivals around the world.

Zeal Theatre's style of theatre has exceptional story telling at its core, with a style that reinforces the power of live performance. They consciously present shows that deal with the hard-edge stuff of life, and characters and situations that are authentically drawn from their conscientious research of those people and circumstances they are theatricalising. They present shows that provoke discussion, opinion, lateral thinking and an exploration of what other perspectives, judgements and possibilities may surround the issue.

The Company deliberately avoids passing judgement; instead various aspects of a scenario are humanised and laid bare for audiences to form their own opinions. Zeal Theatre doesn't offer up neat solutions or moral messages. Instead productions are emotional experiences designed to be catalysts to further discussion and reflection on the complex nature of our modern society.

Zeal Theatre became an Associate Company of Sydney Theatre Company in 2009.

## People Of The Soil - Term Lesson Plans

A term's worth of teaching activities based on the Zeal Theatre methodology of researching, developing, writing, rehearsing and performing a new play.

**Curriculum links:** Group-Devised Performance/Playbuilding, Verbatim theatre, Contemporary Australian Theatre Practice, Physical Theatre, Cross-curriculum content: Environment.

### WEEK 1: OUR TOWN

In small groups of 4-5, create a 5 minute piece of theatre that is a fast paced, humorous and detailed 'ad' about your local town.

The piece can be in the form a television commercial, or in a street theatre format. The piece can also have a town 'jingle' or song with a combination of instruments and props and costumes. It should contain references to the town's history, local identities, famous stories and events, and up-to date references of current issues and concerns. (note: See the opening scene of the film "The Full Monty" as an example.)

### WEEK 2: NON-FICTION & FICTION

In small groups of 3-5 create a scene or series of scenes about a real event in your community using exact details of correct names and places.

After quickly rehearsing and then performing the scene or series of scenes, re-create the same scene or series of scenes as a piece of fiction. For example, change the names and places, re-set the scene in a 'fictional' location. The aim is to create a version of the scene in which different characters portray the same story with 'dramatic license,' in order to make the story more enjoyable and entertaining for an audience.

Discuss the ways in which you need to change a non fiction story to make it more engaging for an audience.

### WEEK 3: RESEARCH

Using the local newspaper as source material, select one or more local articles, and ask students to, either individually or in small groups of 2-3, do further research. Expand on the themes of the story and search the internet or library for similar stories in other towns/cities, and/or they can do their own journalistic-style research to find out more details about the story itself. By taking the initial article as a reference point and through the search for further research 'materials' they will then write a script outline, starting the process of how to develop a piece of local news into a piece of theatre. This script outline should include characters, story events or plot, and an indication of stage techniques.

### WEEKS 4-5: VERBATIM THEATRE

In small groups of 2-3, interview a person or 2-3 people from your community. Preferably record their interview/s either as a verbal recording on tape, or filmed in documentary style footage. The group can transcribe the interview/s, writing/typing out fully in dialogue form exactly what the person said and how they said it, complete with pauses and half words, etc. Then the group needs to edit that transcription 'down' to a monologue of no longer than ten



minutes. The editing process is a way of the group finding out what they consider to be the most 'interesting' dialogue, giving the material a dramatic structure. The editing process can also be a way of the group discovering how to best structure a monologue or a collection of monologues together for maximum effect. The group then performs their verbatim theatre piece to the rest of the class.

#### WEEK 6: "THE MAP" OF THE SHOW

The whole class now needs to isolate an issue, theme or story based on the previous weeks work on the "Our Town" piece, Fiction & Non-Fiction, the research already done and the verbatim interviewing process. Each student starts to develop their own 'interest' in certain areas of a production that will be developed about their own town.

Together the class will create a script outline for the eventual play (what Zeal calls 'the map' of a show). This 'map' should allocate all the material generated by the class so far.

Once the script outline is finalized, the class as a group can decide (or the teacher if necessary) which students will begin to tackle which scenes. (note: some scenes can include the whole class, some scenes can be verbatim style monologues performed by one student, etc). It is important that the class agree on the name of their show. The play may contain pieces that have already been made in previous lessons together with new scenes yet to be created. (note: the 'map' of a show can change daily if need be, but it is important that the map is something the whole class can keep referring to). This can be done on a big piece of butchers paper. Post it Notes are useful to write up each element or scene and allow for ease in reordering, parking some ideas and combining others.

#### WEEK 7-9: WRITING & REHEARSING

Using a combination of research techniques (internet, interviews, further investigation), play-building and theatrical styles (comedy, drama, monologues, etc) the class is now busy further developing, writing and rehearsing a 30-60 minute play about their town, in either a fictional or non-fictional setting. Students may identify in the 'mapping' process what other information they might need.

It will be important to decide at one point in the process when you need to stop editing and changing the material, and shift into rehearsing. Naturally things can keep changing but to be fair on the actors and give them a chance to learn the material, it is crucial to know when you are developing the work, and when you move into rehearsing.

#### WEEK 10: PERFORMANCE

Perform the play to the rest of the year level or other drama classes, and invite all the people you interviewed or who helped in the researching and development stages of the process. After the performance, give the audience the opportunity to respond to the show either in a formal Q & A setting or an informal BBQ style party, or both.

## BURNT Script Development Research Workshop

Wade High School, Griffith, February 17, 2009

Tom Lycos and myself travelled 600 kilometres to Griffith to hold a one day workshop with students and staff of Wade High School to help develop ideas for our new show BURNT.

Students and staff of Wade HS attended a drama workshop at the Sydney Theatre Company in early February and this encounter inspired our trip to that school. The principal and staff and students were very welcoming of our visit and we owe a great deal of thanks to a school which was able to incorporate our visit with their normal schedule on such short notice.

The journey to Griffith was itself an eye-opener. Many smaller towns along the way were littered with For Sale signs. Small conversations we had with locals and shop keepers were filled with sad tales and an overall depressed sense of contemporary living in regional centres, a drying up of resources, jobs and hope. Young people are leaving in droves, older people are desperate to sell their houses and property in order to move to somewhere with more employment opportunity. The very first person I met said "Mate, this town is dying".



***We go to church on Sunday's now to pray for rain.***

Griffith is a relatively 'well off' regional centre with its Murrumbidgee Irrigation Scheme a dominant factor in its successful wine and citrus fruit industries. Wade High School is one of three high schools in the town. The students are a broad mix of ethnic and socio-

economic backgrounds. The teachers first arranged for us to meet a mix of Year 9 & 10 students and we spoke at length about current issues which affect them in and around the Griffith area. We then worked with Year 11 and 12 drama students who helped us develop more theatrical ideas for the show. The third and last session of the day was an interview/discussion group made up of students and staff who live on rural properties around the Griffith area.

The overwhelming sense of the drought was ever-present, even though Griffith is still experiencing a sense of economic "vibrance", it was obvious that the students were concerned with price rises, lack of employment opportunities and the struggles of their parents and families to maintain a decent livelihood as farmers. Not one student's saw themselves as having a future on their family's property. The divide between those families living on 'dry farms' and those on or near a canal was clear. Water equals wealth, and those who have to pay for their water are going broke. The prices of grapes and oranges are plummeting. What was worth \$400 per tonne is now worth \$150 per tonne. What profits are being made from this year's produce is spent immediately on ensuring next year's produce. The cycle of debt seems never ending.



***My parents asked me what to leave us in their will. And I said 'don't leave us the farm'.***

***My dad said "promise me you'll never sell the farm".***

I'm always impressed by how easy it is to get young people to 'open up' their thoughts and ideas and stories, and I love it when debate happens. They want to be heard and are keen to have their views 'represented' by us. Adults can be more guarded about airing their views and opinions, but young people are not so hindered by what other people think or what stigma may apply to certain thoughts and feelings.

***My dad's always on about sub-soil moisture***

The workshop was an enormous success for us. We got a lot of ideas and we got a much clearer sense of where our target audience is at with regard to the issues and themes we want to be dealing with in our show. I think the school loved having us and very much enjoyed being on the ground floor of what could well be a very important piece of theatre for young people and adults. A photographer and journalist from the local paper came and a story about our visit will be printed in the next few days.



***It's been "to leave or not to leave" these past few years now.***

***He's 50 my dad, but he looks heaps older, for a 50 year old bloke.***

***I wanna live in England where it rains ALL the time***



***Q: What does the drought mean to you?***

***A: Mince. I'm sick of eating mince. It's all we eat now. Its mince, mince, mince and more mince. If I eat any more mince I'll explode.***

The next step is for a return visit to the school in a month's time, now that we have the confidence of the students and staff it will be important for us to further our discussions, delve deeper in attitudes and thoughts from the local community and perhaps meet a few more staff members and students and locals. Also we will perform one of our plays to the school "THE STONES" which will give them a sense of how research may be used in a piece of theatre, how ideas can turn into scenes, how dialogue and characters can be incorporated into an overall dramatic structure.

The feeling of 'ownership' by young people in the creative process of a script/production is a very powerful thing, and has always been a feature of our work, and it is great to be at this early stage again with our new project. The energy we get from the students we meet gives us the drive to create something that we would hope not only encapsulates their thoughts and feelings, but something we can all feel proud of creating together and presenting to a broader public.

Stefo Nantsou  
18 Feb 200

## Testimonials



*Burnt* achieved all it set out to do with its very powerful evocation of a family caught in a drought... The three actors in the cast, Tom Lycos, Stefo Nantsou and Lindy Sardelic were brilliant as they portrayed multiple characters.  
*Bega District News, 26 June 2009*



This is a touching story close to the hearts of many rural families but very quickly forgotten here in the big smoke. With three excellent performers playing a host of country-town characters, *Burnt* is a simply delivered production that takes a slice of life during a drought and asks you what it would be like if your future was taken out from beneath your feet.  
*Sun Herald, 28 June, 2009*



They were very taken with the themes explored in the performance and many of them commented, both in written reflections as well as in group discussions, about how much they take for granted living where they do with the advantages they have.. They loved it!!!!  
*Teacher, Arden Anglican School*



The students we brought are students that do not engage in learning, truant regularly, are sent out of class...to see them laughing , enjoying and watching the performance for 90 minutes without losing interest was wonderful and very satisfying.  
*Teacher, Birrong Boys High School*



Images: Tom Lycos, Stefo Nantsou, & Lindy Sardelic  
Photographer: Tracey Schramm

## Other Resources available

There are a wide range of further resources available on the STC Ed website.

Please visit [www.sydneytheatre.com.au/stced/people-of-the-soil-project](http://www.sydneytheatre.com.au/stced/people-of-the-soil-project)

Resources include –

- Interview with Writer/Director/Performer Stefo Nantsou about the process of making *Burnt*.
- Extensive PDHPE notes – relating to *BURNT*
- Extensive DRAMA notes – relating to *BURNT*
- Research notes on Drought
- Production photos