

Sydney Theatre Company, Black Swan State Theatre Company and  
Commonwealth Bank presents

## **Signs Of Life**

By Tim Winton



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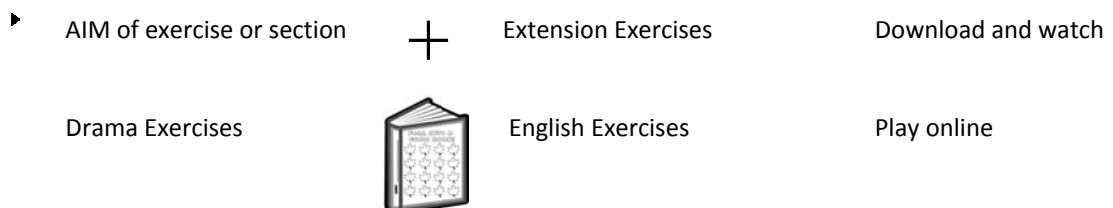
*Legacies* **13-16**

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*Places of Belonging* **17-18**

Education Resource written by Kerreen Ely-Harper and compiled by Acting Education Coordinator Helen

Machalias



### **SIGNS OF LIFE**

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### ABOUT SYDNEY THEATRE COMPANY

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### ABOUT STC ED

[www.sydneytheatre.com.au/stced/about/us](http://www.sydneytheatre.com.au/stced/about/us)

### CREATIVE TEAM

**Director** – Kate Cherry

**Designer** – Zoe Atkinson

**Lighting Designer** – John Buswell

**Sound Designer** – Ben Collins

### CAST -

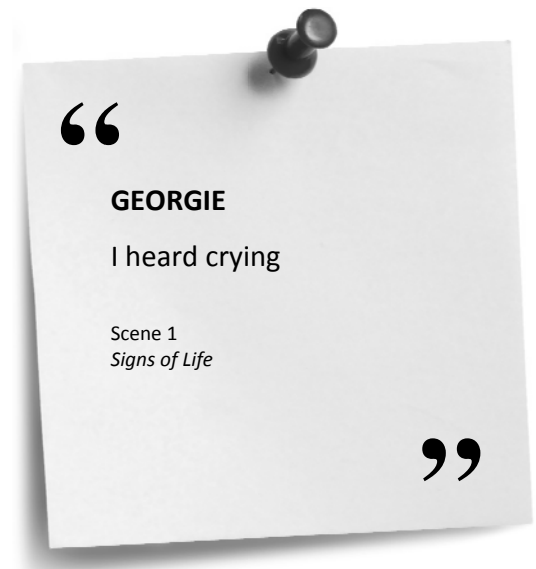
#### Featuring:

Kelton Pell

Greta Scacchi

George Shevtsov

Pauline Whyman



## THEMES

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Belonging

Indigenous Culture

Environment, Drought and Sustainability

Magic Realism

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*A farm house and olive grove sometime in the future in a drought that seems apocalyptic.*

### *Night*

An Aboriginal man, BENDER and his sister MONA'S car comes to a stop in front of GEORGIE'S house. She is sixty years old and recently widowed. She holds up a stick as a weapon. Bender asks if she has any petrol and apologises for scaring her. Georgie asks after his sister, who she can hear crying.

### *Following day. Midday*

Georgie offers them both breakfast. They remain silent. Georgie keeps up the questions about the purpose of their journey and where they are from. Mona leaves the table and begins to weep. When Georgie begins to get up, Bender stops her.

### *Later evening. The moon is rising.*

Mona calls out a name "Bobby. Bobby?" Georgie and Bender come out onto the verandah. Bender reveals he shoots wild dogs and cats to protect native animals for Wildlife sanctuaries on the peninsula. Bender tells Mona to eat her dinner.

Georgie speaks her inner thoughts. Hoping they will leave soon, memories of her late husband surface. She goes to bed in her mind.

Bender and Mona argue. She asks if he will end her back to the madhouse.

Georgie observes their grief. She can hear their snoring.

*The sound of waking birds.*

### *Next day. Afternoon.*

Cockatoos screech. Bender is tinkering with a carburettor and screwdriver. He's fixed the noisy fridge that kept him up all night. Mona asks if they can do down to the river. Georgie offers to show them the way but they don't move, saying they'll go tomorrow.

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### *Evening*

Georgie sits alone on the verandah with a mug of tea. She remembers her husband, LU, describing as eccentric with a strange passion for books. He appears, quoting Emily Dickinson. They converse sometimes as if they can hear each other, at other times, not. They recount the accident with the kite in the olive tree that killed him.

Bender comes out onto the porch. Lu disappears.

Alone in the yard, Bender strikes a match for his cigarette. Standing beneath the olive tree Bender remembers a priest taking a branch and beating a boy, Percy Wingett, senseless. He retreat to the house.

The moon lights up the tree to reveal Lu and then later, BOBBY. Bobby, an aboriginal boy aged six to fourteen years climbs down the tree and watches the house.

Lu tells us Percy became a boxer. When Bobby asks Lu what he is , he replies “Same as you. Carbon”.

### *Next morning*

Mona is drunk. She falls to the ground, weeping. Bender asks Georgie to help him get her to her feet. Georgie reveals she used to be a nurse. Crying Mona asks Bender to kill her. Bender begins to weep.

Bobby appears at the base of the tree and begins to beat the tree, his own face, to close his eyes in grief.

### *Afternoon of the same day.*

Georgie is sitting at the kitchen table. She apologises for not being very helpful with Mona. They share stories about family. Lu has only been dead six weeks and Georgie is unsure of what to do now he’s gone. Bender tells her Mona killed her eight year old son by setting him on fire when she was drunk. He tells her she has a mental illness and was “born damaged”. He is

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concerned she will report them to the police. Georgie says he has nothing to worry about and that they are both safe with her.

*That night.*

A fire can be seen in the distance. Lu looks out from the tree. Mona is sitting on the steps of the house, rocking gently. Lu tells her it's just a bush fire. She can only see her son, Bobby.

*Following morning*

Mona is asleep on the verandah. Bender is working on a tyre. Georgie offers him a mug of tea. He asks her if she knows much about boats. She tells him about her sail to Indonesia. He quizzes her for more detail. She recounts being caught in a violent storm off the coast of Indonesia and single-handedly navigating the boat. Bender tells her about his family and his two brothers. One in goal and one dead. He likens his family to her story "just a big ole storm and it feels like there's no one drivin' ". Mona wakes up and tells him to stop talking about the past. He tells her to clean herself up and eat some food. She retreats into the house.

A flock of cockatoos screech by. Georgie wonders if they will see rain again.

Mona is playing the guitar. She sings beautifully lamenting the death of her son. Georgie remembers her husband, as the guitar was his. Mona hands the guitar back to her. Georgie questions Bender about he and Mona wanting to go down to the river, when they hear the car being driven away by Mona.

*Late afternoon*

Mona sits on the verandah with a sticking plaster on her head. Bender complains about the damage to the car. Georgie tells him about another accident that happened in the same place where her husband's mother was killed by a falling tree.

Georgie presses the issue of the river again, querying whether or not it's a sacred sight. He becomes angry telling her he has "no sacred sights and magic Dreamtime stories." Mona wakes up and embraces her brother. He tells her they will go down to the river.

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They stand looking at the parched river bed. Bender tells the story of his father being taken from his mother and put into a Catholic Mission and his many escapes across the river in a bid to hide from the police who had been sent to return him to the Mission. Lu who has been sitting in the olive tree listening, joins in Bender's storytelling about his own father who would sit in a tree like Simeon Stylites 'to piss the neighbours off'. Bender's and Mona's father had told them this was a good place, a safe place with decent people. Lu says it's true that this was the place but his father was no saint. Mona wanted to come here like her father to find "a sanctuary". Georgie says there is no water and everything is dead now. Bender challenges her "There are birds. Aren't there?" Mona begins keening for her dead son.

### *Evening*

Mona is happy and satisfied she came and saw her son "in the reeds, eyes out like a turtle". She asks Bender if they can come back and buy the place one day. They tell Georgie they will be leaving tomorrow. Bender asks where her husband is buried. Georgie explains the kite and how he came to break his neck. She also tells them she has no legal title on the land as she and Lu were not legally married. She says she's thinking of pressing the olives to make oil and asks would they be interested in staying on and running the business together. Bender is reluctant and says he can't hang around waiting for it to rain. Georgie asks him to think about it at least.

### *Next morning*

Mona is eating her breakfast. Bender nurses a cup of tea. He's grumpy knowing both women want him to stay. Glaring at them both he snatches the kite off the kitchen wall. When they enquire what dies he think he's doing. He says he wants to "See if this bloody thing'll fly".

## **Consider**

holding pattern *noun*

1. A usually circular pattern flown by aircraft awaiting clearance to land at an airport.
2. *Informal* A state of waiting or delay; a static situation

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## HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL BACKGROUND OF THE PLAY

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Just before dawn cockatoos begin to shriek up in the trees on the ridge,  
and as light comes up I roll out of my swag to make coffee while  
spinifex pigeons clatter past.

Tim Winton

*Silent Country: Travels Through A Recovering Landscape*

Tim Winton writes about the Australian landscape and the people who inhabit its margins. *Signs of Life* is his second play and deals with themes that are common to all his work – the environment, spirituality, the imagination, community and family, the role of the outcast and living with the past.

Winton is an environmental activist and a passionate defender of the Australian vernacular through his writing. He advocates for writers “who are in their own place and challenge it from the specific”. American writers such as Mark Twain, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway and Flannery O’Connor are writers who Winton considers as true to their sense of place and cultural voice.

Winton describes writing as ‘a form of hunting’: “you never look in the eyes of the animal. You never look at it directly, because it knows that you’re coming and runs away”. He sees himself as part of a new generation of Australian writers who no longer feel the burden of the ‘anxiety of influence’ of the previous two generations of writers who laboured under the British colonial and European literary traditions.

Born in Perth in 1960 Winton spent his early life there and at Albany, a small ex-whaling town on the far south coast of Western Australia. He read widely and knew he wanted to be a writer at the age of ten. He studied creative writing at WAIT, the West Australian Institute of Technology (now Curtin University), the first university to run a writing course in Australia. There he met his mentor, writer Elizabeth Jolley. At the age of twenty one , he shared first prize in the Vogel National Literary Award for his first novel, *An Open Swimmer* (1982). By the age of

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thirty four he had written fourteen books and was short listed for the Booker prize, with *The Riders* (1994).

Winton says his childhood experiences and memories of growing up in small seaside regional towns have been his greatest sources and inspirations for his writing. A swimmer and surfer, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* was a favourite read. His father's stories he cites as an early major influence. His father was a motorcycle policeman and marksman who would give detailed daily reports of his work experiences to his wife when he came home at night. A young Tim would listen attentively through his bedroom wall to these stories, which were often confronting portrayals of Australian life:

I'd hear these stories of young men dying in his arms  
on the side of the road, or he'd talk about a colleague  
of his being shot - or more funny things, you know?  
Like the day my father was summoned into court  
during a murder trial, to shoot two pigeons that were  
disrupting the final summing up.

When his father was badly injured in a road accident and miraculously survived ("somebody did an emergency tracheotomy right there on the street"), the family converted to the Church of Christ, a fundamental Protestant sect. The themes of spirituality, religious beliefs and practices are often explored in his work and reflect these early experiences and influences on questions of faith and human existence.

Winton is relatively new to play writing. His novel *Cloudstreet* (1992) was adapted to the stage (and television) with huge success. His first play *Rising Water* (2011) was directed by Kate Cherry. The collaboration between Cherry and Winton continues with this production of *Signs Of Life*.

Winton says he did not set out to write plays:

I was writing something where I realised it was all talk.  
And when the play was first read and workshopped with  
actors and a designer and a director and everything, it  
was - I was bricking it, I was so nervous

Despite his initial fears Winton has continued to feel inspired by the theatre as a medium to

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explore character, voice and language. The theatre has provided him with opportunities to reach new audiences. As a writer who is drawn to the unknown, Winton likes the theatre's unpredictability and aliveness:

I think theatre is the last place where you can go and anything goes. You know, when the lights go down and the curtain goes up, the audience is up for anything. And that's terrific if you're a writer.

#### References:

*Transformations: landscape in Australian fiction*, Gillian Tyas, 1995

The Guardian, Interview June, 2008

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/jun/28/saturdayreviewsfeatres.guardianreview9>

#### **Additional Resources**

##### Tim Winton

*The writer and the community: An interview with Tim Winton*, Richard Rossiter, Westerly Centre, Volume 49, 2004

*Transformations: landscape in Australian fiction*, Gillian Tyas, 1995

*Tim Winton: The Writer and His Work*, Michael McGirr, 1994

Transcript of Interview with Andrew Denton, Episode 65, 2004

<http://www.abc.net.au/tv/enoughrope/transcripts/s1227915.htm>

Conversation with Martin Flanagan, 2008

<http://www.themonthly.com.au/node/981>

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5l\\_ovP0rmYI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5l_ovP0rmYI)

*In the depths of Winton*. Interview article on his first play, *Rising Water*, *The Age*, July 30, 2011

<http://www.theage.com.au/entertainment/theatre/in-the-depths-of-winton-20110729-1i3oc.html>

Monthly Essay, 2008

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<http://www.australianwildlife.org/images/File/Winton-SilentCountry-Oct08.pdf>

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Save Ningaloo – Transcript of Rally Speech, December 2002  
<http://www.save-ningaloo.org/frames/media/rally/rallytim.html>

Tim's video message to You – CCWA youtube campaign  
<http://ccwa.org.au/content/tim-wintons-video-message-you>

*Tim Winton becomes a playwright*, ABC TV, 7.30 Report  
<http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2011/s3258055.htm>

*Breathe* website – interview and video of Miles Franklin Award Speech, 2009  
<http://www.penguin.com.au/breath/video.cfm>

ABC WA, 720 Radio Interview with Geoff Hutchinson, 2011  
<http://blogs.abc.net.au/wa/2011/05/tim-wintona-rare-audience.html>

The Guardian, Interview June, 2008  
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/jun/28/saturdayreviewsfeatres.guardianreview9>

### Biography

<http://jd-associates.com.au/authors/author/tim-winton>

<http://www.signsofthetimes.org.au/items/tim-winton-telling-tales>

<http://www.middlemiss.org/lit/authors/wintont/wintont.html>

<http://theblurb.com.au/Issue49/Winton.htm>

### Signs of Life Production

Q&A with director Kate Cherry  
<http://blog.sydneytheatre.com.au/season-2012-ga-with-director-kate-cherry-on-s>

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- ▶ **AIM: To explore the significance and impact of family stories on individual experience.**

### The Family Storyteller

Tim Winton was intrigued by his father's stories as a child.



**Read** this transcript of a television interview conducted by Andrew Denton with Tim Winton.

**ANDREW DENTON:** When you were young your dad was a cop. And you'd lie in bed and you could hear through your bedroom wall your dad talking to your mum about what had happened at work. And a small-town country cop has some pretty good stories. What sort of stuff did you hear? ☒

**TIM WINTON:** Well, I ended up finding out a lot more about my mates' parents than I ever expected to know. You know, the old man knew where all the bodies were buried, and some of them still had pulses. It was, particularly because I was from a really sort of sheltered, loving, warm environment, I was sort of protected from a lot of stuff. This other stuff came to me through the asbestos wall and introduced me to other peoples' lives. I didn't realise how other people lived, you know, that their dads bashed them or that their mothers were frightened or that their brothers were junkies. I can still remember one night when Dad came home and told Mum about... He'd gone to a prang, as we used to call it, or a 'fatal'. It was called a 'fatal'. "Just come in from a fatal." There was always a little bit of a smell of Dettol about him when he came in from a fatal. Um, and a kid had been riding behind a school bus in the country town, or outside the country town I used to live in. And he was sort of chiacking around, showing off for the girls in the back seat. And it was a winding road in a forest. And then he decided he was going to pull out and go into his farm and he pulled out into the path of a truck and...and was hit. And my dad got there while he was still alive and he died in his arms. And, you know, when Dad thought we were safely asleep - 'cause I never slept at all, you know - so everyone else was snoring away and I'd be listening through the wall and hearing Dad off-load this kind of stuff, I guess it had a real effect on me. I mean, it was good for stories if you turn out to be a novelist, but somehow you have to absorb that stuff. And I realised there was so much damage out

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there and people were living other kinds of lives. You know, I guess it fuelled my imagination and I think it gave me more sympathy for other people.

**Discuss** this excerpt with reference to the impact that stories from childhood can have on us later in life.

What effect has Tim Winton's father's stories had on him as a writer and as a person?

Who is the storyteller in your family? A parent, grandparent, uncle/aunt, cousin, sibling, you?

**Recount** a story a family member has told you.

Why is this story memorable?

**Re-tell & develop** your story into a creative piece.

**Ask** yourself, why have you chosen this particular story?

**Record** an interview a family member about their memories of family stories.

What do they remember?

What is significant about the story they have chosen to tell you? Why have they chosen this story rather than another?

**Re-tell & develop** the story into a creative piece.

I remember

**Write** the words 'I remember' at the top of a piece of paper and see what comes out.

**Write** the words 'Yesterday, I' at the top of a piece of paper and see what you want to write about.

Extension:

'Today, I' or 'Today, my father' (or significant family member/care giver)

'Tomorrow, I' or 'Tomorrow, my sister' (or significant family member/care giver)

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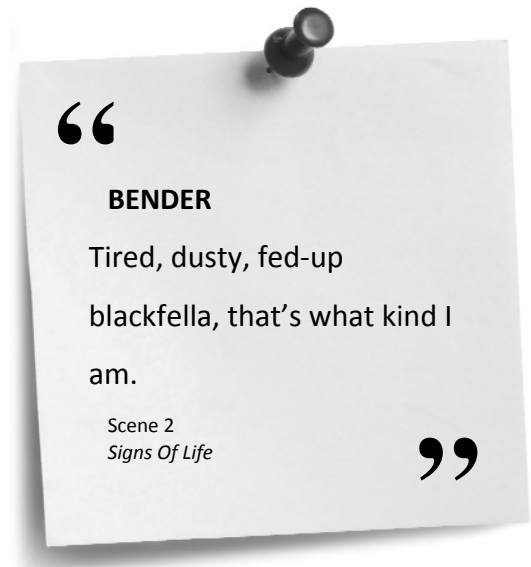
Performance Reflection:

What impact has Bender and Mona's father's story about the river had on them?

What has it caused them to do?

Reference:

*The Writing Book*, Kate Grenville



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- ▶ **AIM: To explore and examine the representation of the impact of past legacies on the present in *Signs Of Life*.**

### The Stolen Generations

BENDER: See, he was took for the Mission. Two year old.

Mum for new Norica, him for Moore river. Run away four times, he did. Nowhere to run to, of course. Where's he gunna go? Doesn't know where he's from, where his people were; language kicked out of him. Doesn't even know what his mother looks like. So where does he go?

Aboriginal children taken from their families are known as the 'Stolen Generation'. The legacies of past Australian Government's racial and welfare policies continues today through the memory stories of aboriginal people who experienced and witnessed the enforced removal of children.

*Signs of Life* attempts to address the past injustices of segregation and flawed child welfare policies and the ongoing trauma experienced by many aboriginal people through the stories of the aboriginal characters, Bender and Mona.



**Research** a personal story of a person who experienced or witnessed removal from their family of origin.

**Look** at Stolen Generation Stories web site for personal stories, poems, books, films, links to resources and related articles

<http://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/politics/stolen-generations-stories.html>

The Stolen Generations

<http://www.stolengenerations.info/>

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Performance Reflection:

What effect do you think Bender and Mona's father's forced removal and separation from his mother has had on their lives?

### Legacy Writing

- Legacy
1. a gift by will especially of money or other personal property
  2. something transmitted by or received from an ancestor or predecessor or from the past

**Picture** your home.

**Sketch** a rough floor plan.

**Label** the rooms.

**Envision** yourself in each room.

**Choose** your favourite room in the house.

**Dwell** in that room.

What do you hear? Smell? Taste?

**Make** a list of things you see in that room. Of the items listed, are any of them special? Do any of them have negative memories or feelings attached? Is there something you see in that room that you wish you had in your hand right now? What is it? Why do you wish you had it?

Why is this room your favourite room?

What part of that house do you not like, feel uncomfortable, avoid, spend least time in?

Where is the safest place in your home?

What is the happiest moment you remember in your house? The saddest? The most frightening?

What is the house like when everyone is home? When people come to visit? When you are there all alone?

How is the house different in day than at night? Winter? Summer? A perfect weather day? A storm?

**Describe** the house from the outside.

You are a real-estate agent, then a potential buyer.

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What do the neighbours see when they look at your house? Or your best friend you bring home from school?

**Walk** around the outside. Are there any bushes? Trees? Flowers? Bare patches? Yellow patches and dug-up spots from the dog? Is the paint smooth and clean or chipped? Yellow or red bricks? Concrete? Is there a gravel drive, pavement, a parking space? A climbing tree? A place to hide? Enough room to play football or barely enough room to turn around? Is there a shed, a garage, a barn, boat ramp, any other structure?



Drawing on your responses to these questions, **write** a short piece about your home and what it means to you.

### Performance Reflection:

How is home represented in *Signs Of Life*?

What connections do the three characters have to the land and the river?

Why does Georgie want Bender and Mona to stay?

Reference:

*Unblocker: Legacy Writing and Fiction Writing Meet*, Eric Wyatt



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- ▶ **AIM:** To introduce the themes of place and belonging represented in *Signs of Life*.

**BENDER:** You know, even on a good day, a happy day,  
I never had the feelin that I was proper, that  
I was safe, that I belonged. Cause there was  
nowhere, no *place*.

### Description of Place



**Describe** a place or a landscape or some other kind of environment:

What time of day is it?

What is the weather?

Rural or city?

Inside or outside?

Is it hot or cold?

Is it a pleasant place or not?

What can you hear? See? Smell?

How do you feel about this place?

Do you belong here? Are you a stranger?

**Write & read** aloud a letter to a friend describing this place.

### **Extension:**

Someone enters the place – casually, violently, accidentally, secretly?

Friend, enemy, stranger?

**Write** a story or dramatic scene

OR

**Write & recite** as a poem

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OR

**Write & perform** as a monologue



Beginnings

**Write** the first scene

**Begin** with the stage directions in *Signs of Life*

*The sound of crickets. LIGHTS UP on a farmhouse at night.  
A wattlebird clears its throat and after a few moments the distant road noise of a vehicle on a highway becomes audible and slowly stronger as it gets closer, until eventually the motor itself is audible, the vehicle's headlights a warm smudge in the distance, and the sound becomes ominous. The engine falters, putters and fades to nothing. Crickets reclaim the night for a moment and then a starter motor begins to natter-once, twice, three times.*

*A LIGHT goes on in the house ...*



**Continue** writing in your own words – what happens next?

*Reference:*

*The Writing Book, Kate Grenville*

“

**GEORGIE**

Look at the olives, listen to the birds. The world is still alive.

Scene 14  
*Signs Of Life*

”

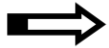
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**AIM:** To discuss and explore *Signs Of Life's* reconstruction of the living past in the present.



What does the phrase 'signs of life' mean?

**List** 3 of the 'vital signs of life'.

**Discuss** the significance of the play's title with reference to the Tim Winton quote.

**Look** at the photo on the [STC Backstage Interview](#)

What is the web designer trying to convey about the production through using this image?

**Consider**

Key Themes

Style & Form

Emotional Tone

Cultural Relevance

Audience Identification



Extension:

**Design/Find** an alternative image to the STC picture.

**Write** a short statement briefly outlining how you think your design represents key ideas from the play and how it will appeal to an audience and make them want to come and see this production.

Then & Now

Tim's ghosts inhabit the present, in fact they often dominate the psyche of the people they move amongst. The ghosts reflect the power of the past, its hold on us.

Kate Cherry  
STC Back Stage Q & A

**SIGNS OF LIFE**

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In *Signs of Life* Tim Winton explores the complexities, contradictions and conflicts of contemporary Australian life in a remote location through memory and time shifts between the living and deceased, aboriginal and non-aboriginal characters, past and present time.

**Read** this excerpt from Scene 5

*Georgie sits alone on the step with a mug of tea*

*Lu is in the tree house*

GEORGIE: He used to tell me, when we were older – two middle-aged people planting trees in the alkaline dirt here above the river, in the days when there was still rain – he said he dreamt of falling.

LU: Just occasionally, at first. And then, every night.

GEORGIE: Not falling from grace, or falling out of favour, just falling –

LU: To earth. Hurling at the dirt – dry leaves, beetles, dead grass rushing up, suddenly –

GEORGIE: Huge-

LU: Planetary-

GEORGIE: Geological.

LU: Made you laugh.

GEORGIE: Maybe you are a weirdo – listen to yourself!

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**Discuss** the literary and dramatic devices Tim Winton employs in this scene to connect us to the history of the characters and the place they both inhabit physically and psychically?

**Consider**

Narrative Voice – first, second and third voice	Words – nouns, adjectives, verbs
Tense	Word play
Punctuation – use of dash, commas, exclamation mark	Rhythm
	Pace

How does memory work in the scene?

When do the characters shift from past present to both being in the present moment?

Why does the writer lead us to this moment of shared connection between the characters?

**+** Extension:

**Write** a short scene between two characters having a conversation.

Both are in different time-place and psychic zones.

They are speaking about one another (or a past event both were involved in) but appear to be unaware of the each others’ physical presence.

At one point in the conversation they have a direct exchange sharing a moment of connection in the present.

*Saint Simeon Stylites*



*A light reveals Lu in the house tree, only slowly as he quotes Emily Dickinson*

LU: “There is a solitude of space, a solitude of sea, a solitude of death,  
But these society shall be, compared to that profounder site that polar  
privacy, a soul admitted to itself: Finite infinity.”

**Discuss** the significance of this quote in the play.

What does it tell us about Lu and his choice to inhabit the tree house?

Lu’s sitting in the tree house is a motif of the medieval Christian pillar hermit who took a vow of solitude and isolation as an act of religious devotion.

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**Research** the story of Saint Simeon Stylites.

**Collect** images of Saint Simeon and or other known pillar hermits.

**Read** Tennyson's poem 'St Simeon Stylites'.

**Discuss** the symbolic significance of the story of the hermit saint.

Why did they isolate themselves on tall pillars?

**Give** 3 reasons why you think Tim Winton included this reference in the play?



**Write** a short piece based on the theme of solitude.

**Write & Perform** a short scene based on the story of Saint Simeon in a contemporary setting.

### FAS

*Signs of Life* explores social and historical issues through its characters personal stories and memories.

**Read** this excerpt from Scene 8

BENDER: She killed her boy. Mona. Set fire to him. He was eight.

GEORGIE: Oh. That's...

BENDER: No words for what that is, Missus.

GEORGIE: (*absently*) Georgie. But... an accident like that-

BENDER: Accident's when you don't mean it.

GEORGIE: No!

BENDER: When she's sober she doesn't mean it. But when she's drunk – well, bit of kero looks good on him, make ya laugh, comedy show.

GEORGIE: No!

BENDER: One flick of the lighter.

GEORGIE: Oh, Jesus.

BENDER: He wasn't easy, that boy. You're a nurse, you know FAS.

GEORGIE: FA-?

BENDER: Foetal alcohol syndrome.

GEORGIE: Oh, yeah. Well, actually, no, not really.

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BENDER: Coulda killed him myself if I'd had to deal with it day and night. Hard work.  
Can't fix it. When it happened I was out the wheatbelt, workin. Read about  
it in the paper – old paper, too. Time I found out, he's buried and she's  
locked up.

GEORGIE: Jail.

BENDER: Nah, nuthouse.

GEORGIE: So, she's been discharged, released?

BENDER: She's a self-releaser.

GEORGIE: An absconder.

BENDER: Runs in the family. Like the FAS. She's got it.

GEORGIE: It's cruel.



**Research** FAS - foetal alcohol syndrome disorder.

[www.nofasard.org.au](http://www.nofasard.org.au)

[www.healthnetworks.health.wa.gov.au/modelsofcare/docs/FASD\\_Model\\_of\\_Care.pdf](http://www.healthnetworks.health.wa.gov.au/modelsofcare/docs/FASD_Model_of_Care.pdf)

[rffada.org/australian-fasd-initiatives/](http://rffada.org/australian-fasd-initiatives/)

[www.abc.net.au/news/2011-10-14/foetal-alcohol-syndrome/3571668](http://www.abc.net.au/news/2011-10-14/foetal-alcohol-syndrome/3571668)

Post-Performance Reflection:

What does Tim Winton want his audience to consider at this point in the play?

How does this background information provide a  
context for understanding Mona's behaviour?

Reference: Education Resource Kit *Signs Of Life*  
Black Swan State Theatre Company,  
Alena Tompkins, 2012.

“

**MONA**

Doan talk about then, bub –  
talk about now!

Scene 10  
*Signs of Life*

”

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**AIM** To discuss and critique the use and interpretation of form and style in the STC's production of *Signs of Life*.



### Realism, Heightened Realism & Magic Realism

**Google** the terms 'realism', 'heightened realism' and 'magic realism'.

**Find** examples from literature, the visual arts, film or theatre to demonstrate key features.

**Create** a checklist of key criteria.

**Share** your information with others in the class.

**Draw** connections to create a class checklist that defines the differences (and similarities) between realism, heightened and magic realism in drama.



### Post-Performance Reflection:

**List** 3 examples of realism and heightened realism in the play.

**List** 3 examples of magic realism.



### Presentational and Representational Acting

*Signs Of Life* is performed in a presentational style.

What is your understanding of the differences between 'presentational' and 'representational' theatre?

**List** 5 key features of a presentational style of acting.

**List** 5 key features of representational style of acting.

**Read** this extract from Scene 4

GEORGIE: And I really do expect him, I think I have every right to... I so desperately want this man to get up in the morning and take his poor

“

**BENDER**

Ha. Wallpaper upsets her.  
Sunshine, bottletops,  
shoelaces.

Scene 11 *Signs Of Life*

”

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damaged sister and the parcel of food I've made up for them and get into that clapped out station wagon and bump on down the drive and go on their way. I've been hospitable, tried to be understanding. I'm tired. I'm not used to people – to visitors, conversations, strangers – and I've got my own decisions to make. I need to clear my head, to think. I know for a fact they've only taken six gallons of fuel, ten at the most, and that's not a full tank; that's not gonna get them far, but that's hardly my problem. They'll be gone, they'll go. Tomorrow will be clearer, tomorrow will be better. So I go to bed. Sink into the pillow that smells of him, look at his boots still in the corner licked by moonlight, and I listen to these people, these visitors as they shuffle about the house opening cupboards and doors, trying the dead television, skidding back chairs, smoking cigarettes, murmuring, bitching as the kettle mumbles and precious water clanks in the pipes. I'm safe. Aren't I?

**Discuss** this text as a form of presentational theatre writing.

**Consider**

Word Usage

Pace

Punctuation

Rhythm

Sentence Structure

Communication of Emotions

Narrative Voice

Relationship with the Audience

Key Images

**Perform** Georgie's monologue in a presentational 'direct address' style.

Post-Performance Reflection:

How do the actors create believable characters whilst performing in the presentational mode?



**Consider**

Tone of Voice

Communication of Emotions

Movement & Body Language

Relationship with the Audience

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**Observe** how Helen Morse performs Georgies' monologue on stage.

**Describe** 3 key features of her performance.

Who is your favourite character in the play? Why?

**Identify** 3 key moments for this character in the play.

How did they change from the beginning of the play to the end?

### Without Words



**Discuss** how information is communicated *without* words in the play with reference to specific production elements.

### *Imagined Spaces*

The set designer is responsible for the overall look of a production.

**Describe** 5 standout features of Zoe Atkinson's *Signs Of Life* set design.

How does she create a believable world through her design and use of space where we the audience are invited to imagine what we do not necessarily always see in reality on stage?

### **Consider**

Place	Line	Image
Time	Shape	Symbol
Furniture & Props	Colour	
Staging & Positioning	Texture	



### Extension:

**Discuss** how does the design incorporate the play's realistic and naturalistic elements with magic realism and the supernatural concepts?

**Give** specific examples from the production to support your response.

### *Lighting Space*

**Nominate** examples from the production where there was an effective use of lighting to create:

- sense of place
- emotional mood
- realism
- sense of time
- atmosphere
- magic realism
- temperature
- presentational style

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## Consider

Colour

Movement

Intensity & Brightness

Visibility & Shapes

Form, Distribution & Depth

Transitions

Direction

### *Costume, Hair & Make-Up*

**Describe** each characters' costume, hair styles and make-up.

How does what they are wearing and the way they look tell us about their background and current circumstances?

How does their appearance change over the course of the play?

## + Extension:

Zoe Atkinson was both the set and costume designer in this production.

**Discuss** how the costume and set design complement each other.

## Consider

Colour Palette

Line & Pattern

Shape

Texture

Contrast

### *Sound Design, Sound Effects and Music*

**Create** a voice chorus soundscape

**Lie** down

**Close** your eyes

**Leader** reads the opening stage directions aloud

**You** make the sounds that accompany the images

*The sound of crickets.*

*LIGHTS UP on a farmhouse at night.*

*A wattlebird clears its throat*

*After a few moments the distant road noise of a vehicle on a highway becomes audible and slowly stronger as it gets closer, until eventually the motor itself is audible*

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*the vehicle's headlights a warm smudge in the distance, and the sound becomes ominous.*

*The engine falters, putters and fades to nothing.*

*Crickets reclaim the night for a moment and then a starter motor begins to natter-once, twice, three times.*

*A LIGHT goes on in the house ...*



#### Extension:

**Form** small groups

**Collect & Foley** the sounds of the opening sequence onto an audio recording device.

**Edit** the audio recording if necessary.

**Add** additional music or sound effects.

**Review** the completed recording.

**Share** your work with others in the class.

**Ask** them to close their eyes and listen.

**Playback** the recording.

**Discuss** the different approaches and range of sounds used by the groups.

**Discuss** how sound can be used to create images, moods and emotions in the theatre.

#### Post Performance Reflection:

**Give** 3 examples of the effective use of sound in the STC production.

#### The Writer & The Director



**Read** Tim Winton's Interview Transcript in STC's online Back Stage magazine

<http://www.sydneytheatre.com.au/magazine/posts/2011/september/qa-tim-winton.aspx>

**Highlight** key phrases, words or statements that interest you.

**Summarize** 5 key points that best describe Tim Winton's writing process and his motivation for writing *Signs Of Life*.

**Read** Kate Cherry Q & A in STC's Back Stage

<http://www.sydneytheatre.com.au/magazine/posts/2011/december/qa-kate-cherry.aspx>

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This is the second collaboration between Tim Winton and Kate Cherry.

What does *Signs Of Life* offer Kate Cherry the opportunity to explore as a director?

In your response to this question refer Kate Cherry's comments in the Q&A.

Post-Performance Reflection:



How does Tim Winton want us to feel at the end of the play?

What was the strongest moment for you during the performance?

Would you recommend this play to other people? If so, why? And if not, why not?

Reference: Education Resource Kit *Signs Of Life* Black Swan State Theatre Company,  
Alena Tompkins, 2012.

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