



RECONCILIATION AND GENERATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY – WHY IS *THE SECRET RIVER* AN IMPORTANT PLAY?

When Cate Blanchett and Andrew Upton began as co-Artistic Directors of Sydney Theatre Company in 2007, they were passionate about adapting Kate Grenville's novel *The Secret River* for the stage. In 2013, the adaptation by Australian playwright Andrew Bovell, directed by Neil Armfield alongside Artistic Associate Stephen Page premiered, in what is now considered a landmark production in Australian theatre. So why is *The Secret River* an important play?

STC's production of *The Secret River* promotes reconciliation between white Australians and Aboriginal people. The narrative of *The Secret River* depicts an element of Australian history that has too often been silenced and denied in history books and remains a contentious issue in the History Wars. The issue at hand is that white Australian settlers failed to accept and live harmoniously alongside Aboriginal people, instead making the tragic decision to massacre Indigenous groups, including the Dharug people along the Hawkesbury. *The Secret River* is central to acknowledging the truth and moving forward, as history should celebrate the good and expose the bad.

Paul Daley, who writes about Australian culture and Indigenous history for The Guardian, believes that “good art challenges preconceived cultural narratives regardless of...discomfort” (Daley, 2015). By learning about and coming to terms with the truth of Australian history, we can begin to celebrate the oldest living culture in the world.

The Secret River also reveals the ‘history of the contested history’ of what has been coined “black arm band” and “white blindfold” history. “Black arm band” history refers to the exposure of previously silenced events of Aboriginal dispossession, violence and racism, while “white blindfold” history is the term used to describe a history that denies past atrocities. Everyone can take responsibility for history by acknowledging and accepting that the past atrocities did happen as a way to heal in the present and move forward into the future. Adapting *The Secret River* for the stage goes some way to breaking the silence of history and is a step toward taking responsibility for the past. *The Secret River* is unique as the audience hear the voices from both sides (Aboriginal and white settler) using a narrative that puts the audience close enough to hear not only the trauma but the internal conflicts.

“We aren't complete unless we know our history and where we come from. Our history has been edited. This play allows us to learn from this lesson. It's a great story, but there are things we need to confront.”

Actor Bruce Spence who plays Loveday in *The Secret River*.

Compiled by Hannah Brown, Education Projects Officer, Sydney Theatre Company. Copyright protects this Education Resource. ©