

**SYDNEY  
THEATRE  
CO**  
EDUCATION



**ON CUE**

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Compiled by Lisa Mumford.

The activities and resources contained in this document are designed for educators as the starting point for developing more comprehensive lessons for this production. Lisa Mumford is the Education Projects Officers for the Sydney Theatre Company. You can contact Lisa on [lmumford@sydneytheatre.com.au](mailto:lmumford@sydneytheatre.com.au)

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# ABOUT *ON CUE* AND STC

## ABOUT *ON CUE*

STC Ed has a suite of resources located on our website to enrich and strengthen teaching and learning surrounding the plays in the STC season.

Each school show will be accompanied by an *On Cue* e-publication which will feature essential information for teachers and students, such as curriculum links, information about the playwright, synopsis, character analysis, thematic analysis and suggested learning experiences.

For more in-depth digital resources surrounding productions, please visit the STC Ed page on our website.

### **Such resources include:**

- Director documentaries
- Design sketchbooks

## ABOUT SYDNEY THEATRE COMPANY

In 1980, STC's first Artistic Director Richard Wherrett defined STC's mission as to provide "first class theatrical entertainment for the people of Sydney – theatre that is grand, vulgar, intelligent, challenging and fun."

Almost 40 years later, that ethos still rings true.

STC offers a diverse program of distinctive theatre of vision and scale at its harbourside home venue, The Wharf; Roslyn Packer Theatre at Walsh Bay; and Sydney Opera House, as its resident theatre company.

STC has a proud heritage as a creative hub and incubator for Australian theatre and theatre makers, developing and producing eclectic Australian works, interpretations of classic repertoire and great international writing. STC strives to create theatre experiences that reflect Sydney's distinctive personality and engage audiences.

Strongly committed to engagement in the community, STC's Education and Communities programs aim to inspire theatre appreciation and participation not only in theatres but also in schools, community halls; wherever people get together. STC offers an innovative School Drama™ program; partners with groups in metropolitan Sydney, regional centres and rural areas; and reaches beyond NSW with touring productions throughout Australia. Through these partnerships and initiatives, STC plays a part in ensuring a creative, forward-thinking and sociable future by engaging with young people, students and teachers.

The theatre careers of many of Australia's internationally renowned artists have been launched and fostered at STC, including Mel Gibson, Judy Davis, Hugo Weaving, Geoffrey Rush, Toni Collette, Rose Byrne, Benedict Andrews and Cate Blanchett.

STC often collaborates with international artists and companies and, in recent years, the company's international profile has grown significantly with productions touring extensively to great acclaim.

STC is assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, by its arts funding and advisory body, and by the New South Wales Government through Arts NSW.

[sydneytheatre.com.au](http://sydneytheatre.com.au)

# CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS



Liam Nunan and Naomi Rukavina in  
Sydney Theatre Company's *Away*.  
© Prudence Upton

## SUITABLE FOR

Students in Years 8 to 12

## SUBJECTS

HSC English Standard and Advanced,  
Area of Study: Discovery set text  
Shakespearean intertextuality  
Australian Theatre

SYDNEY THEATRE COMPANY PRESENTS  
A SYDNEY THEATRE COMPANY AND MALTHOUSE THEATRE PRODUCTION

# AWAY

BY MICHAEL GOW

JIM  
MARCO CHIAPPI

VIC  
JULIA DAVIS

HARRY  
WADIH DONA

ROY  
GLENN HAZELDINE

CORAL  
NATASHA HERBERT

GWEN  
HEATHER MITCHELL

TOM/RICK  
LIAM NUNAN

MEG/LEONIE  
NAOMI RUKAVINA

DIRECTOR  
MATTHEW LUTTON

DESIGNER  
DALE FERGUSON

LIGHTING DESIGNER  
PAUL JACKSON

COMPOSER & SOUND DESIGNER  
J. DAVID FRANZKE

CHOREOGRAPHER  
STEPHANIE LAKE

PRODUCTION MANAGER (MALTHOUSE)  
DAVID MILLER

PRODUCTION MANAGER (STC)  
MARK HASLAM

STAGE MANAGER  
LISA OSBORN

ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER (STC)  
SHANNYN MILLER

ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER  
(MALTHOUSE)  
MATILDA WOODROOFE

FOH SOUND OPERATOR  
LUKE DAVIS

BACKSTAGE WIG & WARDROBE  
MARTELLE HUNT

REHEARSAL PHOTOGRAPHER  
PIA JOHNSON

PRODUCTION PHOTOGRAPHER  
PRUDENCE UPTON

1 HOUR 40 MINUTES, NO INTERVAL

THIS PRODUCTION PREMIERED AT THE  
DRAMA THEATRE, SYDNEY OPERA HOUSE,  
ON 23 FEBRUARY 2017

AWAY WAS FIRST PERFORMED BY  
GRIFFIN THEATRE COMPANY ON  
7 JANUARY 1986 AT THE STABLES  
THEATRE, SYDNEY

ASSOCIATE PARTNER

*Adina*  
apartment hotels



**MALTHOUSE**  
THEATRE

**SYDNEY**  
THEATRE  
CO

# FROM THE DIRECTOR

## MATTHEW LUTTON

Michael Gow's *Away* is a deeply beloved play because through it we are able to see Australia. We see our own families, our own peculiarities, and our own summer rituals. However, we also see a troubled country, and families that are being stretched to the point of tearing.

Behind the veneer of holiday fanfare, Gold Coast glitz, and high school theatrics are three families that are scared, angered, and fracturing. All three families are wrestling with grief; a grief that can drive one away from those they love.

*Away* is also a portrait of a country struggling to come to terms with who it is and whom to include. It paints an Australia with a distinct awareness of class divisions that is struggling to empathise with others and is choosing to repress what is difficult and complex to say.

However, *Away* is a play in which, from out of this muck, the possibility of change starts to arrive. There is no radical moment of transformation or epiphany, as the mythical beach where all three families gather does not provide concrete answers. Instead it is a place where the real work begins. It is a place where listening begins, where curiosity is ignited, where repressed thoughts are put into words and tentative steps are taken forward – the beginning of empathy.

The full-blooded theatrics of *Away* are also part of why it is so beloved. It is a play where fantasias and dreams erupt from a domestic veneer and where nature is epic and engulfing. And it is a play that recognises how much we love to 'play' – that by donning a disguise and creating a fantastical story we can sometimes liberate ourselves to speak a painful truth.

*Away* is therefore beloved because it moves us, because below its summer surface is turmoil, and because it unearths our shared ambition to begin pulling ourselves out from the muck.



ALSO AVAILABLE ONLINE IS OUR DESIGNER SKETCHBOOK WITH  
COSTUME DRAWINGS BY DALE FERGUSON

# FROM THE PLAYWRIGHT

## MICHAEL GOW

My parents and I went on all of the holidays in the play. In our first car, we drove from Sydney to Lakes Entrance in Victoria, down the Hume Highway and back up the coast. All we had was a lean-to tent, some blow up mattresses and an ancient Primus stove, just one burner. It was the best holiday ever.

We graduated to a much bigger tent and every other year, for about six years, we went to a place called Mystery Bay, on the far-south NSW coast, near Narooma. A lot of what's in the play was there: a cave, a headland, and beyond the headland a seven-mile-long beach. Out on Montague Island there's a lighthouse. People from Melbourne were starting to go there, buy land and build houses and there was a strong push to regulate camping, tame the landscape and basically make it a suburb. I went back a few years ago and, fortunately, the development was curbed and the place is still very beautiful.

In the summers we weren't at Mystery Bay we went to Queensland to stay with friends. They had a house in Caloundra. That house has gone and the whole area is blocks of apartments.

One summer, a cyclone came in and smashed all the windows and caused damage all over town. The camping area near the beach was destroyed.

We'd go on outings to places that were pretty flash for a kid from The Shire. Lennon's Broadbeach Hotel was the pick; it had a big pool and a very upmarket restaurant. It looked like the set for *Viva Las Vegas*.

We stayed in a caravan once but hated it, it was too much like being at home.

All of my childhood holidays were happy and comfortable, but I was always aware of underlying tensions. Everyone was stuck together for weeks. People pretended a lot and some of the fun seemed forced. Even as a kid I was taking note of fraying tempers and the façades people put up.

And I was always aware that there was a war going on that Australia was involved in. The adults would talk about it sometimes, when they thought the kids were out of earshot, and it would be mentioned on the nightly news, which was quickly turned off.

When I was 16, my best friend died and that really undermined my faith in the endless sunny happiness of life in the suburbs. This sense of unease beneath the shiny surface of Australian life found a voice in this play.

*Away* is often called a classic, which can be an unwanted burden. If 'classic' has any meaning it's that, though now thirty years old, it's worth revisiting. In fact, though it's set in the sixties, it was very much about the eighties when it was written.

A man called Hedley Richards, who was the men's cutter in the STC wardrobe department told me, when he saw Richard Wherrett's 1987 STC production, that I'd written a wonderful AIDS play. It hadn't occurred to me until he said it, but it was true. It's about the pain of children dying before their parents. Hedley died 18 months later from an HIV-related illness. I always think of him when I see *Away* now.

And here's Matt Lutton and a great cast peering into the dark shadows that haunt this supposedly sunny, restorative play. Watching someone from a younger generation asking questions about our lives and our country makes the label 'classic' not so much of a burden.

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# SYNOPSIS

## ACTS I & II (Sydney)

Sydney, December 1967. Tom and Meg are high school students performing in an end-of-year production of William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. After the performance, their respective parents – Harry and Vic, Gwen and Jim – discuss their coming summer holidays together with school headmaster Roy and his wife Coral. The three families prepare for their separate holidays.

## ACT III (Away)

Christmas Eve. Roy and Coral have flown to a resort on the Gold Coast. Coral befriends Rick, a young man on his honeymoon.

Christmas morning. Meg, Gwen and Jim have driven to a caravan park by the coast. A group of other campers, with a litany of complaints, confront Jim with a petition on how they want to improve things at the camp ground. A terrible storm blows through.

## ACT IV (Away)

Tom, Vic and Harry's camp site by the beach was unaffected by the storm. Meg, Gwen and Jim have joined them there, as has Coral, all just in time for the campers' "amateur night" performances.

## ACT V (Sydney)

At summer's end, 1968, a new school year begins. Meg's drama class read from Shakespeare's *King Lear*.



The cast of Sydney Theatre Company's *Away*. © Prudence Upton.



# CHARACTER ANALYSIS



Liam Nunan, Wahid Dona and Julia Davis in Sydney Theatre Company's *Away*. © Prudence Upton

## VIC, HARRY AND TOM

This English migrant family are working-class characters who take the least glamorous of all of the summer holidays. Much to Gwen's disgust they only have a lean-to, which is a very simple tent-like structure designed to lean against a car. This family prioritises being together, enjoying each others' company and having fun. Tom is sick with leukemia and Harry and Vic realise they don't have a lot of time left together, without telling Tom. They don't value material possessions or social status in the same way that the other characters do, and they are happy in spite of Tom's illness. The transformation for these characters comes as they realise the illness is not a secret amongst them, and Tom accepts his own death at the play's close.



ALSO AVAILABLE ONLINE ARE VIDEO INTERVIEWS WITH THE  
CAST AND CREATIVE TEAM

# CHARACTER ANALYSIS (CONT.)

## GWEN, JIM AND MEG

This family are middle class, and they have worked hard to get there. Gwen had a childhood of poverty, and wants to ensure that her daughter Meg will never have to experience anything similar. She is a strict mother as a result, and is always criticising her daughter for not being compliant enough. The tensions in this family come to the surface on Christmas Day when Meg accuses Gwen of deliberately not packing Jim's box of presents for the family. Gwen undergoes one of the greatest transformations of the play, after the storm when they are on the beach and she agrees to walk with Vic, she is symbolically accepting the changes that are occurring around her.



Marco Chiappi, Heather Mitchell and Naomi Rukavina in Sydney Theatre Company's *Away*. © Prudence Upton

# CHARACTER ANALYSIS (CONT.)

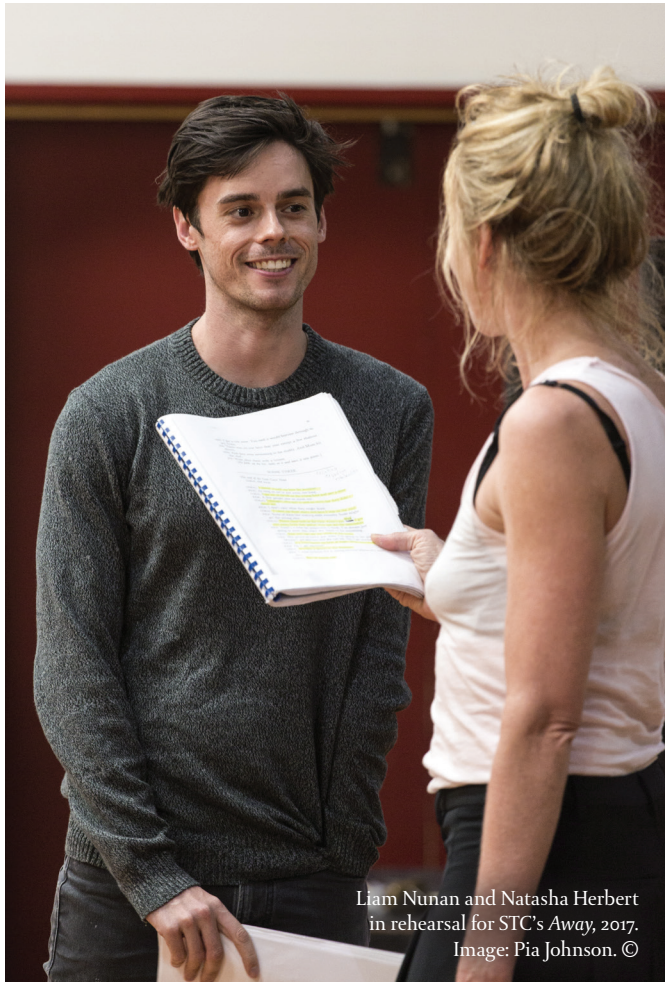


Glenn Hazeldine and Natasha Herbert  
in Sydney Theatre Company's *Away*.  
© Prudence Upton

## CORAL AND ROY

As the school headmaster, Roy represents the character with the highest social standing. He and Coral go away on the most expensive of the summer holidays, to a hotel on the Gold Coast. Their position is somewhat compromised by the tragic loss of their son in the Vietnam War. People pity them somewhat because of this, and Coral is deeply traumatised by her loss. She is unable to engage in social situations which causes tension in their relationship. In the beginning of the play, Roy is pleading with her to be 'normal' again, but it is only at the play's close, when she meets Tom on the beach, that Coral is able to start to emerge from her grief. They create the short play at the talent night, and Coral's character is a mermaid who learns to walk, she says "I'm walking" (Act 4, scene III) repeatedly as she finds her feet. This is a metaphor for Coral learning how to be in the world again.

# THEMES AND IDEAS



## DISCOVERY

Many different kinds of discoveries play out in *Away*. Each of the characters goes on a journey of self-discovery, there are geographical discoveries, discoveries about family and reality. These discoveries allow the characters to overcome the past and move into the future.

Roy and Coral must accept their tragic reality, that of losing a son in the Vietnam War, in order to move forward with their lives. Gwen must accept that her daughter will grow up and make her own choices and live her own life, in order to move past her unrelenting stress and fear. Harry and Vic discover a kind of peace with the reality of Tom's illness in order to enjoy the limited time they have with him. All of these experiences are deeply personal and transformative, arousing empathy in the audience.

## COMING OF AGE

Tom and Meg are at a time in their lives in which they are moving from childhood into adulthood. This can be a confusing time of learning about oneself and one's identity. Tom's experience is affected by the fact that he is terminally ill and in a hurry to experience certain things before his death. Meg's attempts to learn about herself are thwarted by her overbearing mother. Gwen has a tight system of rules and expectations within which Meg must operate. Because of this she is somewhat limited in her life experiences, but in spite of Gwen, Meg is a strong and self-confident character. This is most obvious in the scene in which Tom is pressuring her to sleep with him and she refuses, not caving to the pressure.

Tom's coming of age can be seen through his acceptance of death which is represented through his on-stage observation of scenes in which he is not present. He is ghost-like in these scenes and appears to be at peace with the world. The final scene of the play Tom is not present. Meg is reading aloud from *King Lear* in her classroom; it is implied she is grieving Tom, and has learned to be herself, no longer inhibited by her mother. Throughout the course of the play, the characters of Tom and Meg both grow up and come of age in these different ways.

# THEMES AND IDEAS (CONT.)

## AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY AND WAR

Coral and Roy have lost their son in the Vietnam War. The loss is present in the play through Coral's grief, distance, and her conversations with Roy wherein he is trying to make her move on. Coral repeats lines about the high standard of living in Australia, and the price that must be paid for this. She is directly repeating what Roy has said to her in an attempt to make conversation and overcome her social anxieties. He tells her this to help her accept her son's death and to feel that it wasn't pointless. Many lives were lost in the Vietnam War, and many soldiers returned with what we now know as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), making it difficult to settle back into their lives. Coral and Roy's experience can be seen to be showing the stress and trauma that the war caused for many Australians. The play challenges ideas of Australian national identity around participation in foreign wars in this way.

Other ideas of Australian National Identity that the play is interested in are the beach and the power of the beach to heal, family values and the summer holiday. The play uses these settings and ideas to explore the characters at its heart.

## CONFORMITY AND CLASS

The 1960s were a time of social change in Australia, and the characters in *Away* are wrangling with this. Meg is starting to explore her independence, and Gwen is resisting in favour of more conservative social values. Each of the families represent a particular class: Roy and Coral have the gold coast holiday which is the most expensive; Gwen, Jim and Meg go away in their caravan, a middle class holiday; and Harry, Vic and Tom have a 'lean-to', the least luxurious holiday of all.

Gwen enjoys her middle class privilege and aspires to be deeply normal. She doesn't want to disrupt convention, and attempts at all times to appear as a happy, conventional family. Roy and Coral occupy a position of respect because Roy is principal, but Coral's behaviour compromises their social status somewhat. The family with the least amount of money seem to be the most at peace. They have to deal with the tragic reality of their son's mortality and accordingly enjoy their time together without much concern for material possessions or social status.



# THEMES AND IDEAS (CONT.)

## GRIEF AND LOSS

The deaths of two young men bookend the play, Roy and Coral's son has died before the play begins and, by the end of the play, the audience understands that Tom has passed away. It is through this death and fragile life that one of the key interests of the play can be understood. The adult couples are all losing a child in some way, Vic and Harry to illness, Gwen and Jim to adulthood, Roy and Coral to war.

The play explores death and the ways people attempt to accept loss and deal with mortality. Tom is sick and he and his parents know that his death is a looming reality, even though it goes unacknowledged between them. Tom's parents are trying to protect him from knowing the full extent of his illness and, subsequently, he has been unable to fully understand or grieve his own impending death, until he reveals that his doctor disclosed his diagnosis to him. He will die before his parents and they will grieve reflecting the grief that Roy and Coral experience having lost their son. Through their growing friendship, Tom can be seen to be appealing to Meg to learn more about what it might be like to live a full life and have the opportunity to grow up. In spite of his parents' attempts to protect him, Tom knows the truth about his situation and he seeks out experiences to enrich his life for the time he has left. He asks Meg "What are you going to be when you grow up?" (Act 1, scene ii) which shows his interest in her future as he knows his own will be cut short.

Michael Gow has recently spoken about writing *Away* at a time in Australia when people were losing sons and young friends during the AIDS crisis. The play was written in 1986, a year in which HIV diagnoses and related deaths were rapidly increasing in Australia. At this time, treatment for the virus had not been developed and a diagnosis was a serious threat to a person's life. This reality was a subconscious influence on Gow in his writing, and this grief is present in the play. Tom is on stage for almost the entire production, at times a ghost-like presence, an observer of his own life. During scenes in which his character is not present, Tom remains on the side of the stage watching. The effect of this is to demonstrate the scope of grief that will be felt

with his death, all of the characters will be affected by his death. There is a Puck-like quality to Tom's presence, he is a slightly magical figure observing from a place somewhere between life and death. This is a highly symbolic choice by the director Matthew Lutton to show how significant Tom's imminent death is, that he sees life so differently to the other characters.

The loss of her son has made Coral deeply sad and affected her social skills. Through this trauma she has reverted to a childlike state of needing to be supervised and she is distant from her husband which is affecting their relationship. She craves friendship in young men, as a way of trying to find her son again. This inability to move on from the past and her trauma affects her ability to have meaningful relationships in the present. At the play's end, she participates in Tom's play for the campers which signifies a rebirthing for Coral which suggests she will be able to move on and find happiness again after the storm.

# THE ELEMENTS OF PRODUCTION



The cast of Sydney Theatre Company's *Away*. © Prudence Upton.

## SET DESIGN

The set design takes great care to reflect the major ideas of the production, that of transformation and the epic. The storm blows through spectacularly after the third act assisted by sound and lighting design, but it is the movement of the set which most dramatically signifies the transformation the characters will undergo. In the play's opening the set references the school hall in which *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is performed, timber pillars acting as the trees of the forest. This feeling of the forest and landscape remains into the homes of the families before their holidays, and it becomes the hotel, the campground etc. This is created through the timber floors and pylons, and versatile set pieces. When the storm blows through, trees are lifted, the whole set rises, carrying the characters with it as rain falls and lightning strikes. The storm comes when the families are at breaking point, when they are being ripped apart.

What remains once the storm has passed is a bare white space from which everything has been washed away. This space is highly significant in its representation of the transformation the characters have undergone. Their new discoveries, their new perspectives and understandings are laid bare in this fresh white space. It is also representative of the beach on which the characters meet. The cleansing power of the beach and the symbolism of tensions being washed away is strong in the changed set. This is one of the central ideas of the play; the power of the beach holiday within the Australian psyche to wash away fears, concerns and problems, which is accurately reflected in the set design.

# THE ELEMENTS OF PRODUCTION (CONT.)



Liam Nunan and Marco Chiappi in Sydney Theatre Company's *Away*. © Prudence Upton.

## COSTUME DESIGN

The following is taken from the STC online Magazine costume feature:

Matthew Lutton's vision for *Away* is not sentimental nor nostalgic. As such, although the costumes are firmly placed in the late 1960s, it is a light, restrained rendering of the period rather than a detailed study of 60s fashion. The still-authentic hairstyles and clothing are more like your mum and dad's old photos than a parodic costume party.

*Away* begins with a school production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Often depicted in a romantic setting, this is a sophisticated interpretation with the character of Tom at its centre. This play-within-a-play production might be a schoolboy's dream of theatrical magic. The fairies are very much of scorched earth, reduced to bone and dust in a bleak forest.

At the heart of the play are three mothers and their families, occupying separate levels of society. The costumes work to highlight the divisions and class tensions. Through their clothing we get a sense of these women – from the simplicity of Vic's dress to the more exquisite fashion of Coral.

Act III is partly set at a luxury hotel on the Gold Coast complete with a pre-dinner dance. Capturing the glamour of the 1960s Gold Coast, there is a big shift in the clothing. Filled with aspiration and hinting at a sense of hollowness some of the characters are feeling, the costumes add colour, texture and a little sparkle.



# THE ELEMENTS OF DRAMA

## CHARACTER

'Characterisation is the process of developing from a role to build a complex personality and background for a particular character.'

## SYMBOL

'Symbols can help you understand and focus the drama- they can sum up the meaning of the performance, sometimes on a subconscious level.'

## TIME AND PLACE

'All dramatic action occurs at a time and place... Time affects the place and situation that characters find themselves in.'

*These definitions are from the NSW Drama syllabus.*

### TAKE YOUR CUE

For each of the following character moments, identify one intention or attitude the character was expressing. Give evidence of their attitude - what did they say or do?

- Meg when she challenges Gwen about the Christmas presents.
- Coral when she approaches Rick at the hotel.

### TAKE YOUR CUE

*Away* uses some very key symbols to create meaning for the audience. What do the following symbols represent, and what is the meaning they convey to the audience?

- The set change
- The *A Midsummer Night's Dream* costumes

### TAKE YOUR CUE

What is the place and time of *Away*?

- How does the design of the production represent this? Give detailed examples.

# THE ELEMENTS OF DRAMA (CONT.)

## SPACE

'Space refers to both the shape of the stage/performance space and the spatial design contained in the performance space.'

## DRAMATIC MEANING

'Dramatic meaning is what is communicated between the performers and the audience to create an actor-audience relationship.'  
It is the meaning that is conveyed to the audience through the elements of drama.

### TAKE YOUR CUE

- What sort of stage is this and how does the design effectively utilise the space?
- How do actors manipulate the space, through their stage action, to create situations and build tension?
- What does the set design contribute to the story of the play? How does it serve the dramatic meaning?

### TAKE YOUR CUE

- Considering the above analysis of the themes and ideas explored in *Away*, and your own experience of the play, what do you think the overall meaning of the play is?
- What do you think the writer and director want the audience to take away from this play?

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