

SYDNEY
THEATRE
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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

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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

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS



SUITABLE FOR

Students in Years 11 and 12

SUBJECTS

Stage 6 English and Drama:
Contemporary Australian Theatre
New Indigenous Writing
Romantic Comedy

SYDNEY THEATRE COMPANY AND ALLENS PRESENT

BLACK IS THE NEW WHITE

BY NAKKIAH LUI

FRANCIS SMITH
JAMES BELL

ROSE JONES
KYLIE BRACKNELL
(KAARLJILBA KAARDN)

RAY GIBSON
TONY BRIGGS

NARRATOR
LUKE CARROLL

MARIE SMITH
VANESSA DOWNING

DENNISON SMITH
GEOFF MORRELL

JOAN GIBSON
MELODIE REYNOLDS-DIARRA

CHARLOTTE GIBSON
SHARI SEBBENS

SONNY JONES
ANTHONY TAUFA

DIRECTOR
PAIGE RATTRAY

DESIGNER
RENÉE MULDER

LIGHTING DESIGNER
BEN HUGHES

COMPOSER & SOUND DESIGNER
STEVE TOULMIN

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR
JULIA PATEY

VOICE & TEXT COACH
CHARMIAN GRADWELL

PRODUCTION MANAGER
WHITNEY EGLINGTON

STAGE MANAGER
TODD EICHORN

ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER
JAYMII KNIERUM

BACKSTAGE WARDROBE SUPERVISOR
MARTELLE HUNT

VENUE TECHNICIAN
CAMERON MENZIES

REHEARSAL PHOTOGRAPHER
HON BOEY

PRODUCTION PHOTOGRAPHER
PRUDENCE UPTON

2 HOURS 40 MINUTES, INCLUDING
INTERVAL

THIS PRODUCTION PREMIERED AT
WHARF I THEATRE ON 10 MAY 2017

BLACK IS THE NEW WHITE WAS COMMISSIONED WITH THE SUPPORT OF THE MALCOLM ROBERTSON FOUNDATION

PRESENTING PARTNER

Allens > Linklaters

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THE DIRECTOR IN CONVERSATION

PAIGE RATTRAY

When you first read the play, what struck you about it?

The thing that I was most struck by was how, as an Aboriginal woman writing about middle-class Aboriginal people, Nakkiah is checking her privilege. I was really impressed and excited by that vulnerability. She's really putting herself out there and I think all great artists do that. Nakkiah does it with such charm, openheartedness and humour. She examines her thoughts so thoroughly, leaving nothing unturned, and she uses each character to explore different ideas and points of view. Also, the way she writes about cultural identity and then destabilises it at each turn means that we're constantly questioning what it means to be a middle-class Aboriginal person. She has a gift for self-analysis.

And her ability to follow a path of logic and then turn it on its head and interrogate it at each juncture is remarkable.

Exactly. They're such complex ideas. There's a great scene in the play when Rose Gibson comes home and her Christmas tradition, with her sister Charlotte, is to smoke a joint and have a chat. But things are different this time, because of the information Charlotte has discovered about her father and because she's brought a white man home. They have the most complex conversation but, because Nakkiah has it happen while they're smoking a joint, we can really slow it down and let the characters take their time. If they weren't stoned it could absolutely fly over our heads, but because they're slowed down we can sit with it and take it in. Each word, each idea is placed very carefully. That is genius.

You've been asking the cast to improvise in rehearsals at times. How does that work?

It's a structured improvisation where we break the play down into different main events and then mini events within that. That gives the actors a framework in which to improvise. For this production, I used the improvisations as a way to let the actors figure out the space and find opportunities for comedic moments, like a surprise entrance, for example. It lets me see how the actors might move through the space and how we could tell the story spatially as well as through the dialogue.

Does that improvisation extend to the script? You had Nakkiah in the room to begin with tweaking dialogue? Are the actors taking on those characters and modulating them to their own voice?

That actually happened already through the development phase of the play here at STC. We had a workshop in December last year on the second draft of the script. We had most of the cast assembled, so what the actors did in that development helped inform the characters as they were refined. In these rehearsals, after we'd broken the script down carefully, we noticed that there were little gaps in character journeys, so, along with other tweaks here and there, Nakkiah rewrote the last scene of the play to fill in those holes. Keeping track of eight characters is quite difficult in a rom-com setting. Their ideas around identity, race and sexuality change quite drastically over the course of the play. It's really important to tie all of those things up because Nakkiah is so spot on with her examination of those issues. We needed to make sure that every character was either purposefully left unchanged or their realisations about themselves and each other were clear. In terms of the improvisations, they perform a number of functions. They can help clarify a lot of the subtext for a character, as well as help determine where they are spatially.



ALSO AVAILABLE ONLINE IS OUR DESIGNER SKETCHBOOK WITH
COSTUME DRAWINGS BY RENÉE MULDER

THE DIRECTOR IN CONVERSATION (CONT.)

PAIGE RATTRAY

Are there locations in the set that start to belong to certain characters?

Yes, absolutely. There are so many great playing spaces for everyone thanks to our designer Renée Mulder – she is a gun in the Wharf 1 space; having designed a number of shows in there, she knows all the sweet spots. There's 'Dad's Chair' which is a bit of a throne in this play. Particularly when he feels threatened, Ray Gibson heads to this part of the house. It takes quite a bit to get him out of that place, actually. He's a bit like a cat, he likes to be at the highest point. Then there's the window seat where Joan Gibson likes to sit and smoke a little joint or a cigarette. And a particular spot on the stairs where where Sonny Jones can hear the voice of the Lord.

The narrator is an interesting inclusion in the play. It's such a familiar conceit but it seems almost passé as a concept now. What can the narrator be and what can't it be for it to work well here?

We're still playing with that. The improvisations were useful. We pushed that character to see how far he could be involved in the world of the other characters. We found a few little moments of overlap, but it's actually much better if he is outside the reality, observing. He's more connected to the audience than he is to the characters. At the moment, he's largely staying on stage, but he might step out into the audience. I think we'll keep playing with that right through previews.

You've talked about the play being *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* meets *The Family Stone* meets *Meet the Fockers* meets *Grand Designs*. So, is the narrator Kevin McCloud? Is he our reality show host?

No, we originally did think of him like that but it's evolved since. When Nakkiah was first writing the play, she was thinking of Ray Martin in *First Contact* crossed with David Attenborough. And then we started talking more about Alec Baldwin in *The Royal Tenenbaums* because the documentary style wasn't working in this rom-com context. It needed more of a fairytale element with a storytelling style rather than giving factual information about middle-class Aboriginal people. As the story progresses and we fall further down the rabbit hole, the narrator becomes more casual and loosens up and I think, in a way, that is what happens to all of us watching.

What have you taken away from working on this play?

I have to say, it's been one of the best experiences that I've had working in theatre. Tony Briggs, Melody Reynolds-Diarra and I have all been staying at Adina and walking together to the Wharf. We've talked a lot about their experiences working in theatre and film, and about the incredible toll it takes on Aboriginal actors being killed night after night onstage. Nakkiah has filled this play with so much joy, it feels like our day is about 60% work, 40% laughter. It's brilliant. Within all of the fun it has also been a huge learning experience. Nakkiah is incredibly generous with her knowledge and lived experience, as are the other performers in the production.

THE PLAYWRIGHT IN CONVERSATION

NAKKIAH LUI



What inspired *Black is the New White*?

Black is the New White started for me as two separate conversations. First, I had a conversation with a cousin of mine who is this fabulous, gorgeous young Aboriginal woman with her own business. She's the epitome of an 'Instamummy'. We were having a conversation one day and she started talking about her racial/political beliefs which were kind of akin to black separatism. I thought that was very interesting. I didn't agree with her but I thought it was a really interesting conversation to be having with someone who is part of a new emerging Aboriginal middle class, which is another thing I am very interested in. Within my own family, my mum grew up in a tent and my dad didn't even use a proper toilet until he was ten. However, my sister and I are both university-educated, we both live in inner-Sydney. Within just two generations in my family, there's been a shift in those markers of class. The second part came around the same time, when I looked at census results. Of Aboriginal people who were married, 74%

were married to a non-Aboriginal person. I found this really interesting because compared to the United States and the United Kingdom, we don't actually have high rates of interracial marriage. That statistic might also be inflated because people from lower socio-economic backgrounds don't get married (weddings cost money). But it did intrigue me – who makes up this 74%? So, I was interested in exploring modern Australia, in particular the Aboriginal community – how we identify ourselves in terms of our racial cultural background and then the intersection of that with class. What is it to be 'successful' as an Aboriginal person when you come from a community that is so often politicised? Look at Aboriginal people like Adam Goodes, Nova Peris, Stan Grant who have risen to prominence in their field and become, inadvertently, political.

THE PLAYWRIGHT IN CONVERSATION (CONT.)

NAKKIAH LUI

What then led you to turn it into a romantic comedy?

I really wanted to write something funny and warm. I have had two plays on since 2013 that have been quite intense tragedies. I wanted to create something that was just really warm and fun to write. And when I'm writing a play, I usually hear the characters in my head. In this case, I had these two characters talking to me: Charlotte Gibson and Francis Smith. So I wrote the first scene, pretty much as it is now, about two lovers who met in London having a moment together before all hell breaks loose. For them, talking about race and class is almost like an aphrodisiac. And I just love a love story. I also wanted to present a family of Aboriginal people that hasn't been seen before in the Australian canon – not just in theatre, but in any form. That is, an Aboriginal family who have money, who are not oppressed but who are culturally quite strong. For me, that is quite similar to what I grew up with – a regular family who were political and culturally connected to their community. In the past ten years, my parents have started to become foodies and are into wine – just the idea of seeing Aboriginal people drink on stage in a way that isn't politicised can become a statement in itself. So I wanted to put that forward – here is a family that is like you. An Aboriginal family who I think would probably go to the theatre and go see this play. What I love about theatre is that it's a living organism. That aliveness is there in performance but it's also present and powerful in the creation of the work. I wanted to write something for Aboriginal actors that didn't have death in it. I'm guilty of that myself, most of what I have written has had death. This time, I wanted to write something that didn't come from a place of sorrow or from oppression where the actors would have to rehash that intergenerational trauma all through rehearsals, relive their own experiences of oppression every single day. This was about something instead that had hope and happiness in it.

You're an actor as well and you've performed in some of your work. Here, the character Charlotte Gibson bears a certain resemblance – after all, your dad's name is Ray Gibson. Are these characters avatars or are they based on fragments of real people?

I'd say they're fragments of people. I'm actually terrible at naming characters, so I tend to use names of people who are around me, and who have some kind of connection to that story. I guess for me that must be organic and it's actually really hard to make a name organic as a writer and it's just part of the process, but I've not really thought of that before. You would think that Charlotte is probably some kind of representation of me. I do write a lot about young, female lawyers (I studied law). Having a character like that gives me freedom to write with that critical thinking and questioning that you acquire as a lawyer. For Charlotte in *Black is the New White*, a lot of the things she believed about her father have been pulled out from under her and her sense of her identity, her privilege and her family history are challenged. She has to navigate and find out who

she wants to be in this world without all of that. And find who she is as an Aboriginal woman with a non-Aboriginal partner. What does that mean for her culturally? I'm very clear about the themes and the questions I want to address when starting a new work. I think that is probably the strongest representation of my voice. Sometimes it feels incredibly selfish to explore the questions you have about the world in such a public way but if I'm thinking about it, someone else must be too. There are little traces of me, my family and the people I know in every character. The actors are in it too. If you get the casting right (which I think is spot on this time), the actors bring their characters to life in a way that you just want to keep writing for them. It's actually really hard to stop. I wanted to keep writing dialogue because the characters and the actors were so great to work with. Ray Gibson has my dad's name but is incredibly different to my dad. They probably have the same sense of humour and the same grumpiness but my dad's an incredibly humble and intellectual man. The Joan character is named after my mum and my grandmother and she actually reminds me of my mum a lot. While it is a play about race and class and the idea of how a community changes, it's also very much a story about people who are in flux and have to accept change in their life and, unfortunately, we often seem to do that around Christmas time in front of everyone.

Alongside the examination of class and race there is also a generational gender divide in the play. For the younger generation, the women are very independent. But in the generation above, the women have played support act to their husbands.

Yes, I am very interested in talking about the male privilege that Aboriginal women haven't been allowed access to. I think there are a lot of Aboriginal women who have done so much, who are the backbone of so many families and communities, who are never positioned as leaders. But I think there's a new wave of feminism. Within my family, it's very new. My mother moved to Sydney when she was 16 to be a Nursing Assistant. She's very smart but she was told that there's no point in finishing Year 11 and 12 because you're Aboriginal. So she moved to Sydney to become a Nursing Assistant and then on to become a Nurse and now she's going to do her PhD having continued her education as an adult. She's even been nominated for an Australian of the Year Award. To me, she's a feminist. But she never identified as a feminist. I do see a lot of older Aboriginal women doing that now, and I don't think that's exclusive to the Aboriginal community. I like the idea of women, and especially black women like my mother, identifying as feminist and taking a very proactive step to politicise their gender identity. To have agency and be political about who they are. It's already there for a lot of younger Aboriginal women. We definitely have a different agency and probably more self-determination in how we make ourselves politically heard than our mothers did.

SYNOPSIS

This is a story of two Australian families – the Gibsons and the Smiths – brought together by love and money. Charlotte Gibson is an Aboriginal lawyer with a growing media profile. Her father, Ray, was a prominent activist turned politician who has now retired, together with his wife Joan, to a comfortably upper middle class life. Their other daughter, Rose, is a successful fashion designer with her own brand and is married to former footballer, now banker, Sonny Jones. Francis Smith is Charlotte Gibson's fiancé and is an experimental classical composer. His father, Dennison, was a prominent conservative politician who has now retired, together with his wife Marie, to a comfortably upper middle class life. It's Christmas and the two families are about to meet at the Gibson family's holiday home. Nothing goes smoothly.



The cast of Sydney Theatre Company's *Black is the New White*. © Hon Boey.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

CHALOTTE GIBSON

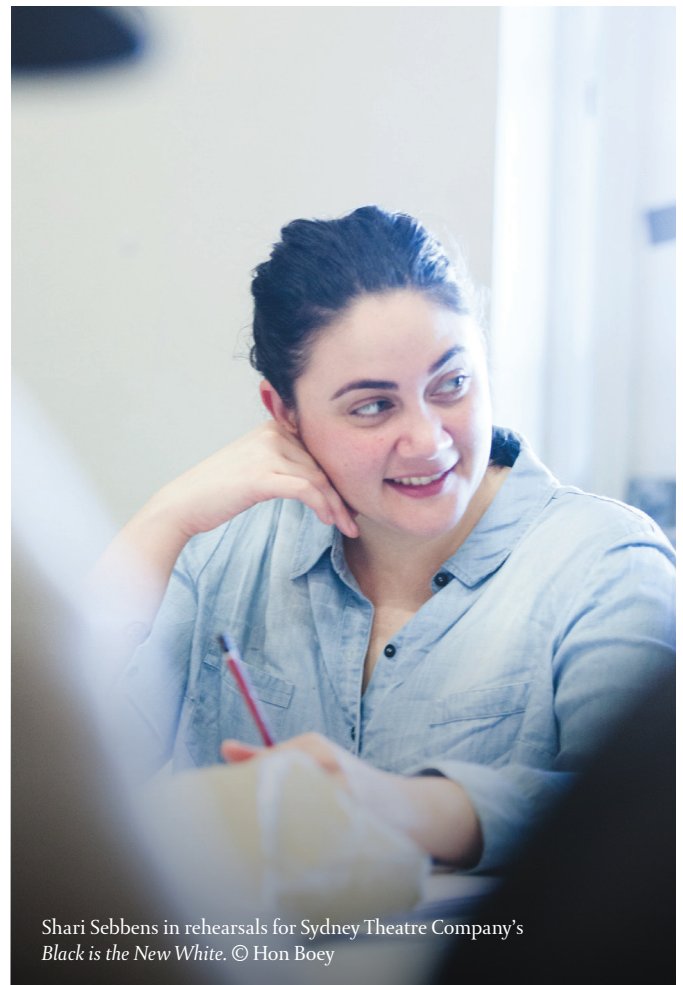
Charlotte is the central character in the play and has the world at her fingertips. She is young, an extremely successful lawyer and social commentator with an offer for a TV show awaiting her reply. Charlotte is not afraid to speak her mind, politically or personally. She defends herself passionately and articulately when her family disapprove of Francis and will always challenge the people around her when they make offensive or politically incorrect remarks. A natural leader, she influences the people close to her and her father has high hopes for her career.

Charlotte comes from a family of very successful people. Her father is a well-known political figure and social commentator, who, at the play's opening, has just made a public speech which has gone viral. He wants Charlotte to follow in his footsteps and she is already on this trajectory – aside from the TV show offer, she has also just won a big legal case. These opportunities are what Charlotte's father wants her to pursue, but Charlotte is more interested in moving to New York with Francis, to undertake a Ph.D. in cultural studies. Her father initially disapproves of this, seeing it as a waste of her potential, but eventually accepts it and her decision to make a life with Francis.

Charlotte is constantly interrogating her own privilege and that of her family. She asks questions about their success, who is responsible for it, and who has suffered as a result. She is a successful, intelligent, driven and politically engaged young woman. She knows what she wants and isn't afraid to defy the expectations put upon her by her family.



ALSO AVAILABLE ONLINE IS A DIRECTOR DOCUMENTARY ABOUT
THE PROCESS OF BRINGING THE PLAY TO THE STAGE



Shari Sebbens in rehearsals for Sydney Theatre Company's *Black is the New White*. © Hon Boey

CHARACTER ANALYSIS (CONT.)



THE GIBSON FAMILY

The play is set at the holiday house of the Gibson family, owned by Charlotte's parents, Ray and Joan Gibson. Ray and Joan are a successful upper-middle-class, middle-aged couple who enjoy the wealth their success has brought about. Ray is a retired politician and remains a prominent public figure, he is outspoken and opinionated and is very dismissive of Charlotte's fiancé Francis. Joan is a relaxed and loving mother who is revealed to be behind Ray's most successful speeches. When Charlotte accuses Ray of claiming Joan's writing as his own, Joan says: '... I didn't... not... write it.' (page 96.) This reveals the extent to which Ray has relied on Joan for his success and is a comment about the ways in which successful men are supported by their partners. Ray and Joan maintain their relationship and at the play's close are still happy in spite of their tensions.

Charlotte's sister Rose and her husband Sonny are also at the family Christmas. Rose is a fashion designer in Los Angeles, and Sonny is a retired football player, once the captain of the Australian national team, the Wallabies. Rose and Charlotte are opposites, Rose the pretty and stylish fashionista to Charlotte's intellectual and critical lawyer. They love each other and are excited to see each other, but they clash over Charlotte's relationship. Rose disapproves of her being in a relationship with a white person; Rose says: 'Sonny and I are going to have little black babies.' (page 52.) She sees Charlotte's future with Francis as detrimental to their family legacy. Ultimately the Gibson family accept Francis, his marriage to Charlotte and their decision to move to New York.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS (CONT.)

James Bell in rehearsals for Sydney Theatre Company's *Black is the New White*. © Hon Boey



FRANCIS SMITH

Francis and Charlotte have only known each other for three months, and they have already decided to get married. Francis is an experimental classical composer who plays the cello. He is loving of Charlotte and seeks her family's approval, but he also has a strong sense of entitlement. As the only child of successful and financially secure parents, Francis is financially supported by them and expects this to continue in spite of the fact that he is an adult, and left home some time ago.

There is a family trust that Francis is paid an allowance from, the rest of which he expects to inherit eventually, but his father announces that because he hasn't pursued a career with a good income, he will be denied access to the fund. Francis says: "It's in a trust. A family trust that's there for all of us. I rely on my allowance." (page 99) This shows his dependence on his family money, and that he is only able to pursue an experimental, artistic career because he is financially supported by his parents.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS (CONT.)

THE SMITH FAMILY

Francis is an only child from a wealthy, upper-class family. His father Dennison Smith is Ray's political rival, a right-wing politician, far more conservative than Ray. Dennison is immediately disapproving of the family Charlotte comes from, and is uncomfortable from the moment he and Marie arrive, while Marie attempts to make an effort by being friendly with the Gibsons. Marie is revealed to have a complicated relationship to her family when she discloses her her sexuality. This confrontational and unexpected kind of humour is in the style of farcical family comedies such as the film *Meet the Fockers*. Marie announces she is queer and has been seeing people outside of her marriage. The family reconcile and accept each other by the end of the play, with Francis being allowed continued access to the trust.



The cast of Sydney Theatre Company's *Black is the New White*. © Hon Boey.

THEMES AND IDEAS



Tony Briggs in rehearsals for Sydney Theatre Company's *Black is the New White*. © Hon Boey

IDENTITY

Legacy is very important to Ray, and this applies to his daughters in both their personal and professional lives which Ray sees as intrinsically linked to their Aboriginal identity. He wants Charlotte to follow in his footsteps politically as an Aboriginal activist, and for both of his daughters to have children with Aboriginal men. Charlotte says: 'He is so intense about this idea of a legacy he has for this family as like, Aboriginal' (page 48). Ray has had a successful career as a politician and has recently made an important public speech about race in Australia which has garnered much attention.

Ray wants Charlotte to follow his career path and continue his work. He says: 'the producers were also saying how great it would be for us to have our own segment. Father and daughter. Talking politics, race and power. The family business.' (page 26) to which Charlotte responds: 'Dad, I don't think Race should be described as the family business. It's a little Third Reich' (page 27). This exchange shows how central race is to Ray's work and

how important it is to him that Charlotte continues that work, but also the ways in which Charlotte struggles with the ethics of the family positioning themselves in this way. Later in the play she says: 'All this talk about Blackness and race. I feel like we're talking from inside a glass castle' (page 139). Charlotte is conscious of the material successes her family enjoys and that their wealth has been earned representing the interests of a community which have not benefited. She says to Ray: 'You fed me a lie. You said our successes are our community's successes. They're not. They're just ours' (page 97).

Ray is deeply affectionate towards Sonny, Rose's Aboriginal husband, and immediately dismissive of Francis, Charlotte's white boyfriend. Although Ray and Francis' first meeting is made uncomfortable by the fact that Francis is naked, Ray's references to him are not just about his nudity, but about also his whiteness. He says: 'I'm not shaking a naked white boy's hand. It's not right' (page 22). Ray continues to antagonise Francis in order to show his disapproval to Charlotte, which is intensified when Francis' father arrives and is Ray's political rival. At the play's end, when Charlotte and Francis marry, and it is revealed that Sonny is not Aboriginal but Tongan, Ray accepts his daughters for who they are in their own lives, not just for their ability to carry on his legacy.

Sonny is a well-known football player and is participating in a reality TV show about ancestry. As a part of the show he takes a DNA test which reveals he is not Aboriginal but Tongan. This complicates Rose's earlier assertions about the need to have children with an Aboriginal man, and Ray's blatant favouritism of Sonny. This plotline is one of the ways the play raises questions about racial identity and how that identity is constructed.

THEMES AND IDEAS (CONT.)

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS AND RIVALRIES

There are rivalries between the families, but also from within the families and this is where a lot of the tension and comedy arises. Charlotte's sister Rose is already married and their father clearly favours her husband, Sonny. He was a great Australian football player and, importantly to Ray, he is Aboriginal. Ray sees him as a suitable man for her daughter to raise a family with. When his identity is revealed through the DNA test at the play's end, Ray's racially skewed favouritism rings hollow. As in all good family Christmas comedies, Charlotte and Francis' families come to accept their decisions to be together, and the Smiths and the Gibsons learn to get along.



The cast of Sydney Theatre Company's *Black is the New White*. © Hon Boey.

THEMES AND IDEAS (CONT.)

PRIVILEGE AND ENTITLEMENT

Charlotte is constantly questioning her family's legitimacy as activists because of their privilege. She feels that because of their wealth and political standing they are not in a position to represent or speak on behalf of the struggle that Aboriginal Australians endure. She says to her father: 'you've benefited pretty well from a community that has nothing to do with what goes on under your roof' (page 95). This suggests that the privileges that have been afforded to the Gibsons have not been shared amongst the people they seem to represent.

Francis feels entitled to his family's money, that he should be supported to be able to pursue his passion even if it doesn't make him enough money to live. When his father tells him he has been cut out of the family trust he says: 'It's a trust. You can't cut me off from the trust. Legally, you can't... I'm not a freeloader, I'm a musician. A classical musician!' (page 99).

STYLE

CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN THEATRE

Nakkiah Lui has written this play specifically for the Sydney Theatre Company 2017 season. It is a new play which has been developed in the lead up to, and throughout, rehearsals. Other plays Lui has written recently include *This Heaven* and *Kill The Messenger* for Belvoir, and a short work for Sydney Theatre Company's *Power Plays*. She also writes for and acts in ABC TV's comedy series *Black Comedy*.

BLACK COMEDY

Black comedy is a style of humour that uses taboo, politically contentious, or serious topics to create humour. The play operates in the tradition of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, *Meet the Fockers*, and *The Family Stone* in creating a family comedy set at Christmas time. *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* is an American romantic comedy from the 1960s centred around an interracial marriage. The film is about a middle class white family in San Francisco whose daughter meets an African American doctor on a holiday. The two have decided to marry and he has come to meet her parents. Interracial marriage was still illegal in seventeen states of America up to six months before the film was released. This made the film topical, and the subject very contentious, which is perhaps why the film was so popular and won a number of awards.

Black is the New White is deliberately uncomfortable at times, directly addressing topics that are not often publicly discussed. The characters discuss embarrassing and awkward sexual experiences, and they find themselves in uncomfortable situations. Early in the play, a naked Francis runs into Ray and Joan by accident the first time they meet. The audience laugh at things that feel private, or inappropriate to share. The taboo is presented on stage for the audience to laugh at, offering the cathartic experience of laughing at things it is usually inappropriate to laugh at.

Nakkiah Lui has said it was important for her to write a comedy. In the play's program, she says: "I really wanted to write something funny and warm. I have had two plays on since 2013 that have been quite intense tragedies. I wanted to create something that was just really warm and fun to write." Australian playwriting has a tradition of presenting Aboriginal characters as oppressed and suffering, and this in an uplifting play, concerned with a successful Aboriginal family. Lui goes on to say: "I also wanted to present a family of Aboriginal people that hasn't been seen before in the Australian canon – not just in theatre, but in any form. That is, an Aboriginal family who have money, who are not oppressed but who are culturally quite strong." It is pertinent to think of this kind of family as being otherwise not represented in Australian culture; this play is making a significant contribution to the Australian canon.

Plays such as *Stolen* by Jane Harrison or *The Dreamers* and *No Sugar* by Jack Davis, as well as many other Australian Aboriginal plays explore the consequences of the Stolen Generations, and the systemic racism and oppression experienced by Aboriginal people as a result of colonisation. These are important historical issues for audiences to understand, and important stories to be told, but these plays can be traumatic for Aboriginal actors to perform night after night. Nakkiah Lui says: "I wanted to write something for Aboriginal actors that didn't have death in it. I'm guilty of that myself, most of what I have written has had death. This time, I wanted to write something that didn't come from a place of sorrow or from oppression where the actors would have to rehash that intergenerational trauma all through rehearsals, relive their own experiences of oppression every single day. This was about something instead that had hope and happiness in it." In the style of black comedy, this play makes jokes about historical atrocities, thus allowing some relief from the realities of trauma.

STYLE (CONT.)

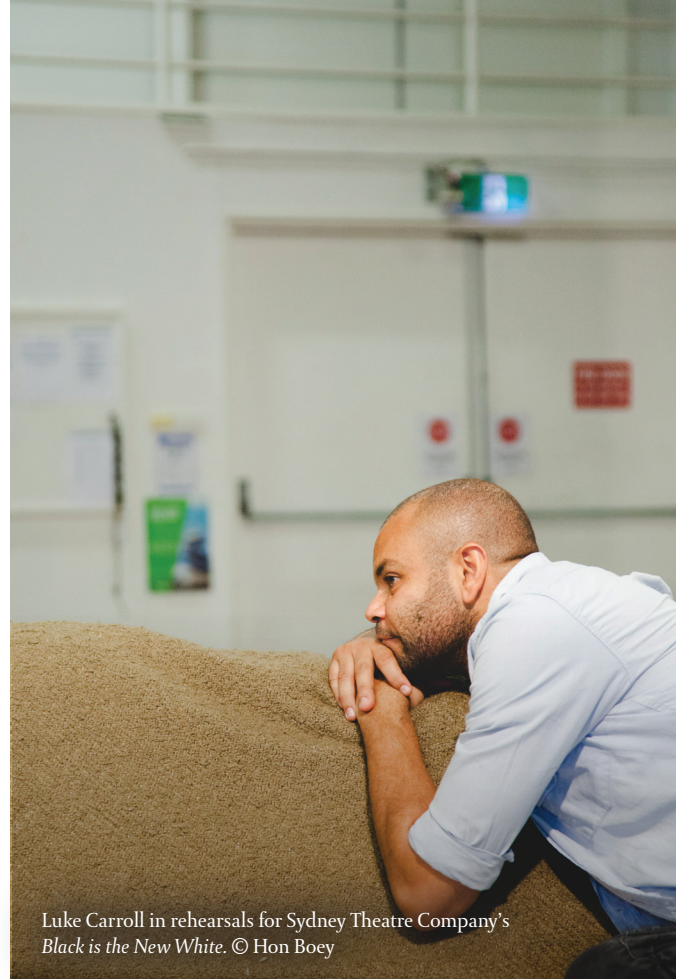
JOKES ABOUT RACE

The play's comedy revolves around the two central families and their differences, specifically their racial differences. The conflict between the two families gives rise to the play's humour as they come to terms with the relationship between Charlotte and Francis. Ray and Rose Gibson initially disapprove of Francis for a number of reasons, one of them being that he is white. They are anxious that their legacy will be interrupted by Charlotte's decision to marry and presumably have children with a white man.

Francis is keenly aware of this, and already an anxious person. The tension that he feels as a result of this sees him making awkward and inappropriate jokes such as when he first meets the Gibsons and says: 'just call me the Aborigines Protection Board' (page 37) in relation to his relationship with Charlotte, a joke about the Stolen Generations. Naturally the family find this uncomfortable, even though Francis was not intending to offend them. Also, when Rose first meets Francis, she asks him where he's from. When he says Australia, she asks again, when he says Sydney, she asks again, until she eventually asks about his heritage, which is English, thus concluding that because he is not Aboriginal, he is not Australian.

The title of the play, *Black is the New White*, is a reference to a particular conversation between Charlotte and Rose about how race and class are defined. If wealth and success is usually associated with whiteness, but they are black and wealthy and successful, then perhaps black is the new white. It is also a reference to the fashion terminology in which black is consistently in style.

These jokes about race serve to offer humour for the audience, but also to point to the ingrained racism that Aboriginal Australians experience every day. By making light of these serious issues, the audience are able to laugh in the moment but think more seriously about the implications afterwards.



Luke Carroll in rehearsals for Sydney Theatre Company's *Black is the New White*. © Hon Boey

STYLE (CONT.)

NARRATOR

The narrator acts as an additional character in this play. While he does not interact with the characters, he knows them intimately. This is the function of a narrator; they are able to speak about the characters without them hearing, and offer insights to the audience, often about things the characters don't know about themselves yet. The director of this production, Paige Rattray, has said that part of the inspiration for the style of this narrator comes from Alec Baldwin's narration in *The Royal Tenenbaums*. This brings a tone that is more like a fairytale or a storyteller than a factual, documentary-style delivery.

In this play, the narrator does this in a way that is comedic. He is invisible to the characters, and at times plays with this, moving pieces of food and other objects to confuse them. This happens very subtly, and only ever briefly enough to offer a laugh, not to distract from the meaning or plot within the scenes. This makes the narrator more personable to the audience, another character in the play.

THE ELEMENTS OF PRODUCTION



Set model box for Sydney Theatre Company's *Black is the New White*. © Renée Mulder.

SET AND COSTUME DESIGN BY RENÉE MULDER

The Gibsons' holiday house is a modern, luxurious, tastefully decorated home. The spacious and opulent house reflects their financial successes. They have worked hard, earned good money, they are well respected, and their home reflects this. The script states that the house is decorated with artefacts from First Nations peoples from around the world, and the characters state that the home is built on their ancestral land. It is built into the side of a cliff, creating a severe and contemporary architectural structure. It is warm and homely, while also being grand and stately.

The costumes are designed to reflect the contemporary time period, as well as the social status, career, and personality of each character. Designer labels are worn by the Gibsons and the Smiths to indicate their wealth and status, and Rose wears costumes that reflect her creativity and career as a fashion designer.

THE ELEMENTS OF DRAMA

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

Black is the New White uses some 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 ornaments around the house
- Ray's virtual reality mask

TAKE YOUR CUE

What is the place and time of *Black is the New White*?

- 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 *Black is the New White*, 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? How is it similar or different to other Australian plays you have seen or studied?

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THEATRE PROGRAM

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