

**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

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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 9 to 12

SUBJECTS

Drama
English
Studies of Religion
Monologue
Adaptation

SYDNEY THEATRE COMPANY PRESENTS

THE TESTAMENT OF MARY

BY COLM TÓIBÍN

MARY
ALISON WHYTE

DIRECTOR
IMARA SAVAGE

DESIGNER
ELIZABETH GADSBY

LIGHTING DESIGNER
EMMA VALENTE

COMPOSER & SOUND DESIGNER
MAX LYANDVERT

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR
DOMINIC MERCER

VOICE COACH
PAIGE WALKER

PRODUCTION MANAGER
KATE CHAPMAN

STAGE MANAGER
NATALIE MOIR

ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER
BROOKE KISS

BACKSTAGE WIG & WARDROBE
DIANE KANARA

VENUE TECHNICIAN
CAMERON MENZIES

REHEARSAL PHOTOGRAPHER
HON BOEY

PRODUCTION PHOTOGRAPHER
LISA TOMASETTI

1 HOUR 20 MINUTES, NO INTERVAL

THIS PRODUCTION PREMIERED AT
WHARF 1 THEATRE ON 18 JANUARY 2017

ORIGINALLY PRODUCED ON BROADWAY BY SCOTT RUDIN PRODUCTIONS.
COMMISSIONED BY DUBLIN THEATRE FESTIVAL AND LANDMARK PRODUCTIONS WITH THE SUPPORT OF THE IRISH THEATRE TRUST.

AUDI NIGHT WITH THE ACTORS PARTNER



SYDNEY
THEATRE
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FROM THE DIRECTOR

IMARA SAVAGE

There are few figures in the world as iconic as Mary of Nazareth. She has inspired stories, paintings, statues, buildings, schools, and ideological and religious movements within and beyond the Christian church. Her reach is truly global. She has been galvanised as an icon, a myth and a symbol, yet rarely have we heard her speak.

In writing *The Testament of Mary*, Colm Tóibín imagined a Mary that, despite all her previous iterations, was yet to be seen by the world. This is a Mary that contemplates what it means to live a life with regrets and lapses of judgment, with rage and grief, with uncertainty and faith. This is a Mary for whom life is chaotic, conflicted and messy, without denying her a sense of piety, devotion and unwavering love. Tóibín's most radical act is to give her the chance to tell her version of events as a woman and mother, rather than as the mother of a god.

While teaching at Princeton and then Manchester University, Tóibín became preoccupied with notions of relentlessness – the way we carry experiences and ideas with us through our lives, the inescapability of our pasts. Connecting these ideas to the figure of Mary, one can imagine the relentlessness of her grief at what happened during and after the crucifixion, the visceral trauma of witnessing this vicious act of violence, and her life as a refugee, fearing persecution as a result of her son's radicalism. This was the starting point of *The Testament of Mary*.

In many ways, this is a play about memory and trauma; it is about being an eyewitness and having to provide an oral testimony. At its heart is the concept of episodic memory, which is not just what happened, but also the sensorial and emotional memories from a particular moment in time. Memory isn't created in a singular moment; it is strengthened and enriched every time the mind touches that memory. Emotion increases the likelihood of a memory being created and magnifies the detail of what is remembered. Later, recalling the memory can cause the emotion to be re-experienced as well and, thus, the memory grows in intensity. It becomes pervasive and interrupts the everyday. This is how trauma persists long after a memory is formed.

In his language, Tóibín traverses the epic and the domestic with enviable ease. He was deeply inspired by the writings of Aeschylus and Euripides, particularly their iterations of *Electra* and *Medea* after learning that Aeschylus may have influenced the Gospel of John. There is a theatricality in Mary's utterances and presence that feels fittingly ancient yet timeless, epic yet undeniably human.

In creating this production, we have been drawn to how myth-making can occur, how a person transcends to become an icon. It is impossible to present Mary, over two millennia after her believed life, without engaging with what she has come to mean in 2017. We have drawn on the imagery of Tintoretto and Titian (see pp 18–23), while also exploring contemporary performance artists like Marina Abramovic´ and Cindy Sherman – particularly their exploitation and deconstruction of classical iconography.

In one way, this production aims to strip back the myth and to literally and figuratively take Mary off the pedestal, only to re-mythologise her in a new, psychologised portrait. Our Mary speaks of love, family, generosity and humility in ways that echo and resonate with Christian scripture and the virtues traditionally ascribed to her. But she speaks from her own humanity. And that is what makes her such a thrilling character to bring to life, not just on the page, but specifically for the theatre.

We hope that sitting with this woman and hearing her story afresh helps us remember what it means to really listen to another person's story, particularly when you think you already know how it goes.



ALSO AVAILABLE ONLINE IS OUR DESIGNER SKETCHBOOK WITH
COSTUME DRAWINGS BY ELIZABETH GADSBY

SYNOPSIS

Mary, having lost her husband and son, lives alone, exiled. Approached by Jesus' disciples to speak of him, Mary pieces together her memories.

She speaks of the people close to him and the events that led to his brutal death – of Lazarus rising from his grave, of water turning into wine, of bloody crucifixion.



Alison Whyte in STC's
The Testament of Mary, 2017.
Image: Lisa Tomasetti. ©

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Alison Whyte in SIC's
The Testament of Mary, 2017.
Image: Lisa Tomasetti. ©



MARY

Mary is the mother of Jesus and worshipped in Catholicism as a saint. She is traditionally understood as a symbol of meekness, of humility, of grief and powerlessness. Colm Tóibín sets out to contrast these ideas of saintliness to explore Mary as a complex human suffering loss. In this play, Mary is the central and only character on stage for the duration. This is a key device to consider as it gives her absolute autonomy, and the audience only have her perspective and her story to hear. This is in direct contrast to how Mary is usually understood. The stories of Mary and Jesus, and the official accounts of their lives are told in the Bible within the Gospels, from the perspective of four of Jesus' followers. This production posits Mary as the central figure telling the story of her son's life and death from her own perspective. This is a radical new way to hear Mary's story, and the story of Jesus.

Mary is a complex character, driven to tell her story. She speaks with conviction and an urgency which engages the audience. Set some thirty years after the death of her son, her tone implies to the audience that this is the last chance she has to tell her story, that it might be the only opportunity to have

her perspective heard and this creates a sense of imperative which compels the story forward and invites the audience to understand Mary's trauma and despair. She says, 'I speak simply because I must.' (Page 21)

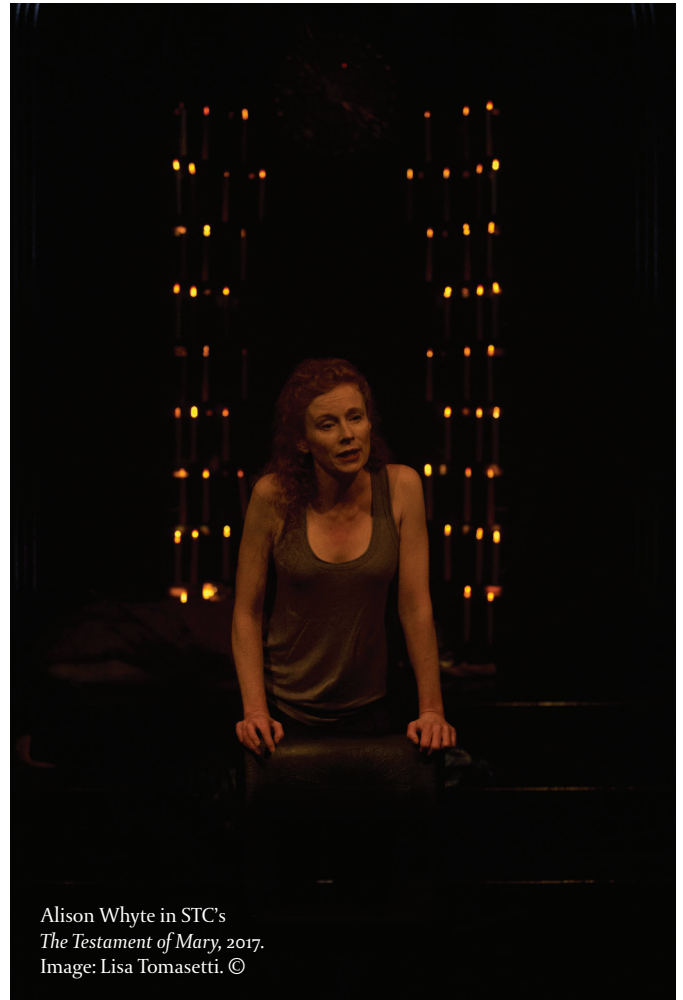
Mary is initially presented as a maternal figure, trapped and breastfeeding. At the play's opening, she is encased, like a statue in a museum. She holds a suckling lamb to her breast and performs her maternal duty. This state of being is presented and then challenged. Its restrictions are, over the course of the play, deconstructed; Mary descends from the plinth and layers of her costume are stripped back. As she moves more freely, closer to the audience, and addresses them directly, she becomes more humanised.

MAJOR IDEAS

RELIGION

Offering new ideas about long-held conventional beliefs can be controversial. Given that religion is based on specific belief systems, presenting ideas or perspectives outside of these can be challenging. Mary is a sacred figure in Christianity, particularly Catholicism, and this play imagines new ideas about her life and how she may have felt about the crucifixion of Jesus. Religions can be strict in their telling of historical stories and figures and, as such, imagining a new version of Mary and putting words in her mouth can be contentious.

Colm Tóibín was raised Catholic and it is important to him that audiences know he has no intention of being disrespectful of Mary or Catholicism. He is quoted in the *Weekend Australian*: “I am serious. I am not involved in mockery. I want people to believe me,” He goes on to say that he is interested in presenting Mary in a new and different way, not to be blasphemous, but: “I am interested in the human, secular element of this, in what it would have been like for her. I know that to some extent this is playing with fire, but if we don’t do this as writers, what is the point? Otherwise we are just about entertainment, and I am not interested in that.” (*Weekend Australian*, Australia 07 Jan 2017, by Stephen Romei).



MAJOR IDEAS (CONT.)

NEW FEMALE PERSPECTIVES

The Testament of Mary offers a voice to a well-known but largely silent figure. The story of Jesus in the Bible is told through the Gospels, which are stories told by four men – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. This production is interested in the story of the life and death of Jesus from his mother’s perspective, as well as how Mary is historically represented. The play is particularly interested in giving Mary a humanity, in making the audience more aware of her as a woman and mother who has lost a son in tragic circumstances.

Mary is presented in the play’s opening as a figure to be revered. She is encased as if in a museum or mausoleum. This is a symbolic representation of how Mary is traditionally depicted, it is a restrained and passive position. The play sets this up in the opening, in order to dismantle and challenge it. As Mary tells her story, she comes down from being encased, becomes more humanised and tells the story from her own perspective. This peeling back of layers is an effective way of allowing the audience to think of Mary as a woman and think about her and her life beyond the classical images we are usually presented with.

The character of Mary tells the stories of the miracles from the Bible, stories that have been told repeatedly for generations, in a new way. The stories are challenged by Mary’s somewhat sceptical view of the acts her son performed. In Mary’s telling, these stories come out of the realm of historical myth and into her own reality, into a world in which she lived and witnessed. The effect of this is to give Jesus and his actions a more human quality. He is spoken about as a man amongst people, and Mary’s maternal tone means she is able to be simultaneously tender and critical.

The way Colm Tóibín imagines Mary’s perspective on Jesus is radical in that the way she speaks of his actions sometimes borders on disapproval. She speaks of Jesus bringing Lazarus back from the dead and says ‘healing the sick belonged to others, but ... raising the dead belonged to no one.’ (page 12) This suggests that Mary was suspicious of what her son was able to do, that she believed he was putting himself at risk by performing miracles.

By giving Mary a voice in this play, Colm Tóibín is challenging the historical silencing of women, especially within a religious context. The life of Jesus is told through the Gospels, and this play gives an imagined voice to his mother in order to suggest her experience of his life and death. It is an interesting and important new perspective from which to hear this story.

PERSONAL SACRIFICE VERSUS UNIVERSAL BELIEF

The story of Mary is the story of a mother making the ultimate sacrifice, that of losing her child, for the sake of human salvation. Christians believe that Jesus died to atone all humankind of sin. While this is viewed as a major honour, this production seeks to explore the experience of a mother losing her son on a personal level.

The play is based in the real world, more than the world of religious texts and historical stories. Through this lens, universal belief can be weighed against personal sacrifice. When the humanity of the character and the reality of her experiences, of her despair and grief, are shown, it becomes more difficult to assume her loss was worth it. It forces the audience to ask questions about how stories of faith are told, whom they are about and whom they are for.

The personal sacrifice that Mary made is often overlooked in favour of the belief that all of humanity was absolved of sin when Jesus died. This play seeks to bring her experience to the fore in order to understand the reality of a mother losing a son. The play ends with Mary saying ‘when you say that he redeemed the world, I will say it was not worth it. It was not worth it.’ (Page 23.)

STYLE



Alison Whyte in STC's
The Testament of Mary, 2017.
Image: Lisa Tomasetti. ©

MONOLOGUE

The power of this story comes from the singularity of Mary standing on stage, speaking directly to the audience. She is by herself and as such has the autonomy to speak from her own perspective. This is a highly personal perspective, told in the first person. Tóibín's decision to tell this story in the form of a monologue reinforces his political choice to give Mary a voice, unfettered by other's perspectives. In this way, the form and content reinforce each other

A testament is something that serves as evidence of a particular event or occurrence, usually as told by a witness or person who has experienced the subject. A testament is often spoken, and as such is well suited to the monologue form. Mary is giving her testament to two men who have come to speak to her, thirty years after the death of her son. The passing of this amount of time is also significant in the play, as Mary remembers the story the audience have a sense of her determination to get it right in spite of the time passed. In this way, Mary's relationship to the audience becomes significant. The audience are bearing witness to this chance Mary has to tell her story, she implores us to listen. There is an element of catharsis for Mary through the act of giving a testament, and this can be seen as a way for her to deal with her grief. It is this nature of a testament, of telling and listening, that makes this story an ideal monologue.

This play is an opportunity to experience a masterclass in monologue performance. Telling an important historical story in a compelling new way, the performance utilises a variety of techniques such as direct audience address, pause, changing pace, movement and effective blocking.

HISTORICAL REIMAGINING

Giving Mary the right of reply requires her to be redrawn and recreated. In order for the audience to believe and understand this character, they need to accept a fictitious imagining of a perspective otherwise silenced. Mary becomes a human character, a mother with real-world experiences. This is vastly different from her representations as an icon, a mythologised but usually silent figure. While the play is based on historical and religious fact, it imagines the thoughts and feelings of a character in a level of detail that is not officially recorded.

PRODUCTION ELEMENTS

SET AND COSTUME DESIGN

The design pays deliberate homage to classic iconography of Mary, and subverts this in particular ways in order to humanise her. The colour palette of the design includes the blues, reds and golds common in classical imagery of Mary. The design references famous portraits of Mary with Jesus as a baby and when he dies. Much traditional imagery of Mary depicts her without agency – she is positioned in relation to Jesus her son, but also in relation to the ways other people have described her. Her gaze is often passive, subdued and downward; her identity is drawn from what others have projected onto her.

This lack of agency is challenged over the course of the play as Mary steps down from her plinth and directly addresses the audience in her own words. Layers of the costume and set are stripped back in order to create a sense that Mary herself, not just the Mary of iconography, is finally telling her story.



Alison Whyte in STC's *The Testament of Mary*, 2017.
Image: Lisa Tomasetti. ©

THE ELEMENTS OF DRAMA

These definitions are from the NSW Drama syllabus.

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.'

RESEARCH

- How has Mary been depicted throughout history?
- Can you find examples of three well-known artworks and identify any common symbols they share?

TAKE YOUR CUE

- For each of the following symbols, what is the idea being represented or challenged?
 1. The lamb
 2. The blue shawl
 3. The chair

TAKE YOUR CUE

- When and where is the action of this production set?
- How does the audience know this?

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 is the space Mary occupies in the play's opening?

TAKE YOUR CUE

- How do the directorial and design choices contribute to the overall meaning of the play?
- Describe, in your own words, what the major directorial vision for this play is.

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