

SYDNEY  
THEATRE  
CO  
EDUCATION



ON CUE

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

About <i>On Cue</i> and STC	2
Curriculum Connections	3
Cast and Creatives	4
The Director in Conversation	5
Synopsis	8
Character Analysis	9
Themes and Ideas	13
Style	16
Elements of Production	17
Discussion Questions	18
Bibliography	19

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



## SUITABLE FOR

Students in Years 10 to 12

## SUBJECTS

Drama and English Stages 5 and 6

SYDNEY THEATRE COMPANY PRESENTS

# THREE SISTERS

BY ANTON CHEKHOV

IN A NEW ADAPTATION BY ANDREW UPTON

OLGA  
ALISON BELL

PHILLIP  
PETER CARROLL

RODE  
CALLAN COLLEY

IRINA  
MIRANDA DAUGHTRY

TUSENBACH  
HARRY GREENWOOD

ANFISA  
MELITA JURISIC

ANDREI  
BRANDON MCCLELLAND

MASHA  
ERYN JEAN NORVILL

SOLYONY  
RAHEL ROMAHN

KULYGIN  
CHRIS RYAN

NATASHA  
NIKKI SHIELS

VERSHININ  
MARK LEONARD WINTER

CHEBUTIKIN  
ANTHONY BRANDON WONG

FEDOTIK  
CHARLES WU

DIRECTOR  
KIP WILLIAMS

DESIGNER  
ALICE BABIDGE

LIGHTING DESIGNER  
NICK SCHLIEPER

COMPOSER  
THE SWEATS

SOUND DESIGNER  
NATE EDMONDSON

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR  
JADA ALBERTS

VOICE & TEXT COACH  
CHARMIAN GRADWELL

PRODUCTION MANAGER  
JOHN COLVIN

STAGE MANAGER  
SARAH SMITH

DEPUTY STAGE MANAGER  
TODD EICHORN

ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER  
JENNIFER PARSONAGE

SOUND OPERATOR  
TIM WALKER

BACKSTAGE WARDROBE SUPERVISOR  
ROCIO EIRAS

WIG STYLIST  
NICOLA WATERS

REHEARSAL PHOTOGRAPHER  
HON BOEY

PRODUCTION PHOTOGRAPHER  
BRETT BOARDMAN

3 HOURS, INCLUDING INTERVAL

THIS PRODUCTION PREMIERED AT  
THE DRAMA THEATRE, SYDNEY OPERA  
HOUSE, ON 10 NOVEMBER 2017

PRODUCTION PATRON

W & A JOHNSON  
FAMILY FOUNDATION



SYDNEY  
THEATRE  
CO

# THE DIRECTOR IN CONVERSATION

KIP WILLIAMS

**This is the first play by Anton Chekhov that you've directed. What drew you to *Three Sisters* in particular?**

There's a confluence of events that leads to *Three Sisters*. The first being that it was the first Chekhov play I ever read. I remember by the end of the second act I was thinking, 'Nothing happens. What's going on?' Then, when it hit the third act and the town fire happens, all of a sudden it sprang to life for me and the play started to open up, particularly in the way in which it explores loss, death, change, our resistance to change, and our attempts to fulfil our desires. The struggle of being human. I saw all that captured in this writing in a way that I hadn't experienced from any other writer.

I've long since held the desire to explore a Chekhov and so the other serendipitous thing that led me back to *Three Sisters*, is that amongst the great exploration of Chekhov that we've seen on Sydney's main stages in the past decade, *Three Sisters* hasn't been done. At STC, we've staged *Uncle Vanya* and *The Present*. At Belvoir, we've seen *Ivanov* and *The Seagull*. And earlier we had *The Cherry Orchard* at STC, but *Three Sisters* hasn't been done here for 16 years, which has given me the opportunity to have a go.

On a more specific level, the exploration of siblings in the play chimes with me. Whenever I meet somebody, I'm always fascinated to know how many siblings they have and where they sit in the family. While it's obviously reductive, I find it informative. In *Three Sisters*, Chekhov is exploring the ways in which we seek to define our identity – through work, through relationships – so I think it's no coincidence that he contextualises that interrogation through a sibling dynamic. It's one of the most fundamental ways in which we are first narrativised – the eldest child does this, the second child does this, the youngest child is like that. He then poses the questions, 'How do we become stuck in such narratives?' and 'How do we rally against them?'

**Andrew Upton has written the adaptation. He's our former Artistic Director here, someone you've worked with often, and a regular adaptor of Russian plays. What does he bring?**

He brings a number of things. First and foremost, people have a misconception of Chekhov being terribly dour and unfunny, when in fact it's quite the opposite. Chekhov intended *Three Sisters* to be a comedy. Andrew has a brilliant sense of Chekhov's comic sensibility, so his adaptations are very funny; he burrows into the heart of the humour and mishaps of these poor individuals.

Also, Chekhov was interested in the grand experiment of naturalism, and Andrew's writing is an expansion on some of the principles Chekhov established. Andrew writes thought-patterns with an immense amount of complexity in a way very few writers can. It's one of the things Chekhov helped bring to playwriting – capturing the way that people actually speak, the half-thoughts, the change in direction of thought mid-sentence. Andrew can capture that beautifully and offers a contemporary evolution of it.

Thirdly, one of the things I've been interested in when approaching Chekhov's text is the fact that he knew he was going to die when he was writing his plays. He had tuberculosis, he was deeply unwell. So, inside *Three Sisters* are existential questions around the purpose of living, the significance of it, the meaning of it, and the failure of it. Death and mortality hang over the play in a profound way. I think Andrew understands that bedrock of the play, while bringing to it a punk sensibility – a spirit of rebellion and anarchy. When Andrew's playful sense of anarchy collides with existentialism, it creates theatrical fireworks – I think about the abandon, joy and explosion of emotions that we saw in the party scene in *The Present* (STC 2015) in which you have characters on top of a table dowsing themselves in vodka, while someone's having a heart attack at the same time. He understands the mess of life and all the humour, celebration, pain and anguish that comes from knowing that you're going to die.

# THE DIRECTOR IN CONVERSATION (CONT.)

## KIP WILLIAMS

**You have a fairly pared back, austere design for this show. What were the conversations you had with designer Alice Babidge and lighting designer Nick Schlieper?**

There's a sense of the production taking place in the past, sometime in the early 1970s, but at its core, the conceptual approach towards the design and staging is an abstract one almost trapped in time. At the start, the set has quite a literal relationship to the audience, giving a sense of a house. But further into the play, we start to use the set in a way that is more abstract, less naturalistic. In the end, we are in a psychological landscape that wouldn't be out of place in a Samuel Beckett play.

This allows us to put the existential questions inside Chekhov's play front and centre. Both the plot and the subtext of *Three Sisters* are about a perpetual state of decay and loss in the lives of these characters as time slowly betrays them. I wanted the space to reflect and emphasise this. So, the naturalistic framework of Act 1 slowly dissolves and, by the final moments of the play, the characters are set adrift without any of their familiar anchor points.

I also think there's a conversation at play between this production and my production of Caryl Churchill's *Love and Information* (STC 2015). Chekhov and Churchill are asking similar questions, but where they differ is in their relationship to time. In *Love and Information*, Churchill posits that human beings might just be vessels for information to be passed on from one generation to the next. It's a fairly bleak, blunt and brutal philosophy, but then she asks, 'How do we generate meaning within the finite time frame of our lives?' It's a very similar question to what Chekhov is asking, but Churchill's play, which has 70-odd non-linear scenes, operates as though each scene could be taking place simultaneously, whereas Chekhov asks that same question in *Three Sisters* (how do we generate meaning within a meaningless existence?) but does so over the course of five years.

In Chekhov's play, the brutality of time is expressed in how difficult it is for the characters to perceive its impact on them. The beauty of the play is that, as an audience, we do get to perceive it. We have five years condensed into four exquisite acts and can see time's impact. We witness the universal human struggle to conquer it. He gives us access to that failure, with which we can both laugh and cry.

All of these ideas are what drew me to the play and they're important threads within my own work. Beckett's influence in the design really goes back to my first encounter with *Waiting for Godot*, and the way in which he uses familiar references as

an agitator inside an abstract landscape. In *Godot*, there's a very clear reference to the Eiffel Tower, so we know, on some level, that the play is taking place in France or the French countryside or that there's a grounding in a literal reality. At the same time, I don't think anybody watches Beckett and thinks that it's a totally real world that they're seeing before them. It's an abstracted, mythological universe that is conjured before us that echoes our own experiences in a very concrete way, and that's what I'm trying to achieve in this production.

It's a different approach to many other productions of Chekhov's plays – indeed of *Three Sisters* – being done around the world at the moment, that really try and push its naturalism. That's never my line of inquiry. I want audiences to find their own associations to the work; I'm not interested in providing those associations explicitly in the work for them. Andrew, Alice, Nick and I were never going to create a version of *Three Sisters* that was explicitly about Putin, Trump and WikiLeaks. You may walk out of the show and find those associations, and I think a great piece of work will allow you to do that, but I wanted to access something more personal in the writing. To me, it speaks to this deeper philosophical question about how you approach your own life. Chekhov's naturalism was ground-breaking, but I think the greater experiment within his writing for *Three Sisters* is this distillation of time into a very finely constructed fouract structure and what that distillation allows us to perceive about time and its effect on us. It's a truly remarkable achievement. I think that's why the play endures.

**Indeed, in compressing those five years into four acts, Chekhov is pre-empting cinematic montage – with each cut from the end of one act to the beginning of the next, we understand that the sisters' lives are being constricted step by step. How would you describe the three sisters?**

They're complex characters, but one way to think about them is in terms of time.

For Irina, the youngest, the future is everything. People in her life all see her as an ideal: 'the young, beautiful sister'. They gravitate towards this false version of her, which prevents her from having the space to be messy and herself. It also means she lives in a world of ideals and ideas, creating for her an abstract sense of self. She wants to work, but in something that is a pure vocation, and which will make a contribution to the greater good. This is going to give her life meaning. It's an ideological way of thinking about the world and it lacks pragmatism. She has no sense of how ideals butt up against the realities of living. For many years, she lives in this abstracted place where she can't truly engage with the world.

# THE DIRECTOR IN CONVERSATION (CONT.)

## KIP WILLIAMS

It's as though she lives only in the future. It's an abstracted reality.

Olga, on the other hand, lives mostly in the past. She's practical and gets on with things, but she also has a relationship to memory which is quite paralysing for her. It prevents her from taking risks. It prevents her from making mistakes. It's an idealised version of the past as opposed to Irina's idealised version of the future.

Masha is the sister who lives in the present. She is the most immediate, which on some levels frees her, but she consequently lacks the foresight and the hindsight of her sisters resulting in actions that are messy and chaotic and damaging to herself.

That's a very schematic reading of them but I think we can all see ourselves reflected in these traits at various points of life. Times in which we are idealistic but impractical, times in which we are held back by our sense of the past, or times when we have acted recklessly without any sense of a broader context.

**Chekhov may have written *Three Sisters* as a comedy, but it asks some very sobering questions. What do you feel we walk away with after the show?**

The play explores the conundrum of how to align our desires with our actions, how to reconcile what we want with what we have. It's about how not aligning these things can create great pain within our lives. Chekhov's play illuminates that pain and gives us an opportunity to reflect on our own lives. It offers great catharsis.

There are four siblings in this family, all of whom are trapped in some way, trying to make sense of that and trying to wrestle themselves out of it. The play is a call to the audience not to be trapped in the same way. To find a meaningful answer to the question: 'how to live?' We can laugh at life's struggle and we can cry at it, but either way, we're going to die.

*(They laugh.)*



# SYNOPSIS

*Three Sisters* is set in a small, remote town dominated by an army base. The action takes place in the Prozorov family home over a span of several years.

Born and bred in a thriving metropolis, the Prozorovs came to this small town when their father was made commander of the local army brigade. Now, the Prozorov family consists of four siblings: Olga, Masha, Andrei and Irina, the youngest. Three sisters and one brother.

Both of the Prozorovs' parents have died. The mother many years ago; the father precisely one year earlier, on Irina's 21st birthday. Irina's 22nd birthday is thus also the first anniversary of her father's death. Old family friends and acquaintances drop in on the family to mark the occasion.

Amongst the visitors is Colonel Vershinin, the new brigade commander, who has only recently arrived in town and becomes a spark of new potential, particularly for Masha.

Each act of the play moves forward in time, charting five years in the life of the town, its soldiers, the Prozorov household and its three sisters.



Alison Bell, Miranda Daughtry and Eryn Jean Norvill in Sydney Theatre Company's *Three Sisters*. © Brett Boardman

# CHARACTER ANALYSIS



Alison Bell in Sydney Theatre Company's *Three Sisters*.  
© Brett Boardman

## OLGA

Olga is the eldest of the sisters and the matriarchal figure of the family. She is dedicated to her career as a school teacher and by the play's end she has become the school principal. Olga is single and remains so throughout the play, with only one reference to a time she almost had a relationship with her sister's husband, Kulygin. She is dedicated to her family and the compassion she shows for Anfisa, contrasted to Natasha's heartlessness, exemplifies her giving and selfless nature. Olga mothers the other characters throughout the play, looking after the household and comforting her sisters in times of distress.



ALSO AVAILABLE ONLINE IS A THREE SISTERS LESSON PLAN

# CHARACTER ANALYSIS (CONT.)



Eryn Jean Norvill in  
Sydney Theatre Company's  
*Three Sisters*. © Brett Boardman

## MASHA

Masha is the middle sister. She married young and is unsatisfied with her marriage to Kulygin. She falls in love and has an affair with Vershinin. Of the three sisters, Masha is the most vocal about her disapproval of their brother's wife, Natasha. She is different to her sisters; prone to dreaming and unafraid to express her feelings, she can be hot-headed and dramatic, thus providing humour and relief throughout the play. As a trained pianist, Masha is the 'artist' of the family.

# CHARACTER ANALYSIS (CONT.)

## IRINA

Irina is the youngest of the sisters and it is her birthday on which the play opens. She wants to return home, as they all do, but Irina talks about it and longs for it the most. Home by her imagining is the place she will fall in love and find happiness. By the play's end, when it becomes obvious that this is not possible she resolves to become a school teacher like her sister and stay in their provincial town, dedicating herself to the work of teaching. Irina marries Tuzenbach, not out of love so much as a sense of hopelessness and because it seems to be a way to move her life forward.



Miranda Daughtry in Sydney Theatre Company's *Three Sisters*.  
© Brett Boardman

# CHARACTER ANALYSIS (CONT.)



## ANDREI

As their only brother, Andrei is a source of disappointment to the titular sisters. He was an aspiring professor and had a promising future when they lived at home, but he has now become a small time clerk at the local council of their small town. He has also developed a problem with gambling and drinking in their new locale and has mortgaged their house to pay off debts. He has also met and married a local woman, Natasha, of whom the sisters disapprove. Andrei seems to be controlled by those around him, rather than being in control of his own life. He doesn't challenge Natasha and her demands on himself and his family, and accepts her increasingly unrealistic expectations. This affects his relationship with his sisters but he is unable to act to fix his family.

## NATASHA

Natasha is nasty and controlling. Her treatment of Anfisa is shown in direct contrast to Olga's and as such is used to show their stark differences. She sees Anfisa as too old to serve her utilitarian purpose and wants to get rid of her to avoid a burden on the family, while Olga feels a duty to continue to look after her because of her long service to the family. Natasha is local to the area, as opposed to the sisters and Andrei who moved from home, a city, 11 years before. This implies she is provincial and vulgar, not educated and cultural like Olga, Masha, Irina and Andrei. She is shown to be controlling of Andrei and eventually of the sisters and the whole household, using her children as an excuse to force out guests and make demands of the other characters. Olga and Irina are forced into sharing a room when Natasha claims Irina's room for her son, Bobik.

# THEMES AND IDEAS

## IDEALISM VERSUS REALITY

The three sisters, the central characters of the play, are essentially idealistic and full of hopes and dreams for the future. The hopes that they hold out: of moving home, of finding love and happiness are ultimately dashed by the play's close.

Masha is so disillusioned with her reality that she resorts to having an affair in an attempt to find some meaning or satisfaction. She is let down even by this, her desperate and ideological attempt at some kind of satisfaction, when Vershinin leaves with his army battalion in the final scenes.

Irina decides to marry Tuzenbach in an attempt to find happiness, and out of a sense that it is the right thing to do. This is a tragic situation, that a woman has dreamt of love and marriage since her childhood as the way to find happiness, only to marry someone who loves her but whom she does not love back. It is an act of sad desperation, a hopeless attempt to grasp at happiness. As it happens, Tuzenbach dies soon after they are together, immediately dissolving any hopes Irina had of happiness with him in the future.

This happens at the end of the play, and serves to remind the audience of the sisters' endless ideological attempts to find happiness and how they are continuously thwarted by their reality.

The play presents a cycle of attempts to find happiness followed by disappointment. This cycle has started long before the play starts with the death of their parents, the move away from home, Olga's inability to find love, and Andrei's failure to succeed in the career that he and his family had hoped for. At the play's end, the audience is left with the overwhelming feeling that this cycle of hope and disappointment will continue long into the future for these characters.

## GRIEF AND LOSS



Chris Ryan and Mark Leonard Winter in Sydney Theatre Company's *Three Sisters*. © Brett Boardman

# THEMES AND IDEAS (CONT.)

The play is interested in the search for meaning in life. The characters long for a time in the past when they were happy at home, and for a time in the future when they might return and find happiness again. Their dialogue and actions signal their attempts to achieve these dreams. They search for love and mourn their late father, they have affairs and they attempt to find happiness. They pursue meaningful careers and yet they are faced with disappointment and tragedy.

Throughout the play, the characters struggle with the endless disappointment of life. They fondly remember the past and yet their reality is at odds with this, as they are stymied by their circumstances. Forced to live in a provincial town that is not their home, somewhere they don't belong, their brother marries a local woman who starts to impose restrictions upon the household. Natasha's rules become more and more oppressive of the sisters, as Olga and Irina are forced to share a bedroom and restricted in their social events. When they attempt to organise a farewell party for the military battalion about to leave, a battalion of men who have become their friends, Natasha forces the soldiers out and shuts the party down. This controlling behaviour is one of the ways Natasha attempts to assert herself and her position in the household.

The raging fire offstage is symbolic of the destruction occurring onstage. As the fire burns through the town, the characters' own hopes and expectations suffer the same destruction. The sisters offer help to their community, as their own home is not directly affected in the blaze. This charity is offered as a gesture of hope for the future, and in spite of the damage being done. This is symbolic of their attempts within their own lives to continue in spite of disappointment.

# THEMES AND IDEAS (CONT.)



Eryn Jean Norvill and Mark Leonard Winter  
in Sydney Theatre Company's *Three Sisters*.  
© Brett Boardman

## THE ROLES OF WOMEN

The sisters are the central characters and together form the backbone of the Prozorov family. They support their brother Andrei and his wife Natasha in their family home, their father's home. Through these characters, the traditional roles of women are both reinforced and challenged at different times. Olga occupies the maternal position of caregiver in the household, but she also has a successful career as a teacher and eventually a principal. Masha perhaps most challenges traditional ideas of how women should behave, specifically through her affair with Vershinin. This is an act disobedient to her husband, which is not in accordance with expectations for a woman's behaviour in this context. Irina is lost and confused about the role she should occupy, eventually deciding to marry Tuzenbach only for him to die and for her to dedicate her life to work instead.



# STYLE

## MUSIC

Music is both an important part of Chekhov's writing and of Kip Williams' direction. In this adaptation, Bob Dylan song lyrics are used to connect Masha and Vershinin, a contemporary version of the Russian folk song used in the same way in other versions. This is an important way to show a connection between the two characters, whose interactions are plainly obvious to everyone including Masha's husband Kulygin. The whimsical nature of the music alludes to their yearning for a life together and the ways they use the affair as an attempt to escape their reality. The use of Bob Dylan not only brings the play into a contemporary context, but also sets the tone of their relationship. The music of Bob Dylan is associated with rebellion, with dreamers, with protest, and with love.

## LANGUAGE

The characters use language in interesting and important ways. The way the characters speak is often halting and interspersed with non sequiturs, perhaps a reflection of the state of mind of the characters. The way language is used to reflect the characters' worldviews and wellbeing is crucial to understanding the play.

## CONTEMPORARY ADAPTATION

This is a new adaptation by Andrew Upton of *Three Sisters*, originally written by Anton Chekhov in 1901. A contemporary adaptation brings a play into a new context, and allows a new way of viewing and understanding a play for a contemporary audience. The language is recognisable to our modern vernacular while still telling the original story.

# THE ELEMENTS OF PRODUCTION



Eryn Jean Norvill, Alison Bell, Miranda Daughtry and Brandon McClelland in Sydney Theatre Company's *Three Sisters*. © Brett Boardman

## SET DESIGN

The design takes great care to reflect the major ideas of the production. The performance space changes shape and size according to the action that is being played out, and to reflect the feelings of the characters. In the beginning of the play, the space is open and welcoming as the characters are feeling optimistic about their futures and the possibility of returning home. As the play progresses, the space closes in on the characters. Walls enclose the space to reflect the feeling of entrapment. By the fourth act, the set has disappeared and a desolate mood is created with a single tree on the set, with a pair of abandoned boots below it.

The set employs the use of a mirrored wall which can appear transparent or opaque depending on how it is lit. This is used to reveal, hide, and reflect to effect.

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Are the characters in control of their own lives?
2. Which character do you relate to the most and why?
3. What does the fire represent?
4. How does power operate in this production? Who has it and how does it shift throughout the play?
5. How does music serve both the story and your experience in the theatre?
6. Did you identify any symbols in the production? What were they and how did they operate?

## RESEARCH

Consider the context in which Chekhov was writing. The play was written in the lead up to the Russian Revolution. How has this political context influenced Chekhov's writing, and what evidence can you see in the play?

## RESEARCH

Research Chekhov's personal context. Why was he interested in telling an existential story of grief and loss?

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## WEBSITE

[https://resource.acu.edu.au/siryan/Academy/texts/three\\_sisters.htm](https://resource.acu.edu.au/siryan/Academy/texts/three_sisters.htm)

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## PLAY

Upton, Andrew. *Three Sisters*. Currently unpublished.

## THEATRE PROGRAM

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