

# SYDNEY THEATRE CO EDUCATION



# On Cue

Così

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Compiled by Llsa 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. Jacqui Cowell is the Education Projects Officer for the Sydney Theatre Company. You can contact Jacqui on [jcowell@sydneytheatre.com.au](mailto:jcowell@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:

- STC 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, 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 9 to 12

## SUBJECTS

Drama and English Stages 5 and 6

Links to Drama Stage 6:  
Topic 1 Dramatic Traditions in Australia

Drama Stage 5:  
Dramatic Form and Performance Styles,  
Realism/Scripted Drama

English Stage 6:  
Advanced and Standard related material  
- Texts and Human Experiences

SYDNEY THEATRE COMPANY AND MELBOURNE THEATRE COMPANY PRESENT

# Così

By Louis Nowra

**ZAC/NICK**

Gabriel Fancourt

**DIRECTOR**

Sarah Goodes

**PRODUCTION MANAGER**

Genevieve Jones

2 HOURS, 40 minutes  
(including interval)

**JULIE/LUCY**

Esther Hannaford

**SET DESIGNER**

Dale Ferguson

**STAGE MANAGER**

Jess Maguire

This production  
premiered at Southbank  
Theatre, The Sumner,  
Melbourne, on 4 May  
2019.

**HENRY**

Glenn Hazeldine

**COSTUME DESIGNER**

Jonathon Oxlade

**ASSISTANT STAGE  
MANAGER**

Jaymii Knierum

Così was first performed  
by Company B at the  
Belvoir Street Theatre in  
1992.

**CHERRY**

Bessie Holland

**LIGHTING DESIGNER**

Niklas Pajanti

**SOUND OPERATOR**

Kevin White

**LEWIS**

Sean Keenan

**COMPOSER &  
SOUND DESIGNER**

Chris Williams

**MECHANIST**

Doug Niebling

**ROY**

Robert Menzies

**ASSOCIATE  
SOUND DESIGNER**

Amy Holley

**WARDROBE  
SUPERVISOR**

Simone Edwards

**DOUG**

Rahel Romahn

**ASSISTANT DIRECTOR**

Rachel Chant

**WARDROBE  
MAINTENANCE**

Carol Tee

**RUTH**

Katherine Tonkin

**FIGHT  
CHOREOGRAPHER**

Dr Lyndall Grant

**PRODUCTION  
PHOTOGRAPHER**

Jeff Busby

# A Note from the Director

Sarah Goodes

*Così* is set in 1971, a time of great social change in Australia: the anti-Vietnam war protests were in full flight, the second wave of feminism was arriving on our shores. It could be argued that Australian society hadn't, up until that point, experienced a climate of social change so profound. For the patients in *Così*, who are isolated from the outside world in a psychiatric hospital, the play is about loyalty - being loyal to ideals and being loyal to those you love. For Lewis, the play's protagonist, *Così* is a lesson in the importance of the connection between people, regardless of what revolutions are going on.

Like the characters in *Così*, we are living through a period of acute personal change and the play is a wonderful and timely reminder that interpersonal connections are the things that matter most.

Before we programmed this play, I came to Sydney to meet Louis Nowra for fish and chips in his beloved Kings Cross. Born and raised in Melbourne, Louis came from a family plagued by serious and devastating mental illness and, as a young man, he decided to face his fear by going to work at the Mont Park Psychiatric Hospital in Melbourne. *Così* is a dramatisation of his experiences directing a show with a group of patients there. Louis spoke of the pure exhilaration he and the cast felt when the curtain fell on the opening night of that show. We talked at length about the joy, thrill and extraordinary sense of comradeship you feel in theatre when you pull off the seemingly impossible. How, for a brief moment, you soar together into the world of imagination. An alchemy of sorts, theatre carves out a small and fragile space for connection, transformation and transcendence.

This idea of transformation provided a wonderful springboard for the design team and me. The play references the elements of fire, water and light, which are all important components in the practice of alchemy. We decided to explore these as a metaphor for the transformative alchemy of theatre. Another aesthetic provocation was the colour spectrum. One day I wandered into a rehearsal room and found the head of the props department sorting through all the fabric and plastic flowers we had in stock, she was neatly placing them in colour-coded piles. I was stuck by the wide array of colours and took a photo to share with the designers. A discussion ensued about the satisfaction we all found in sorting ordinary objects into colour groups and the idea found its way into the production with flags and colour coded piles around the space, along with nests that each character developed in the temporary home that is a rehearsal space. Needless to say Roy's inspiration wall included photos and quotes from Bobby Helpmann – his idol.

We also wrestled with the male violence in the piece and the

way women are represented and treated. As we considered these aspects of the script, composer Chris Williams reminded us that the characters in *Così* argue about the exact same thing: people have for years tried to find ways to justify the appalling sexual politics of the opera *Così fan tutte* so as to be able to enjoy the music with impunity. The politics of gender and sex are always part of the fabric of society and *Così* reminds us of how far we have come and how far we still have to go.

Ultimately, this piece is a love letter to theatre and to the glorious actors that bring theatre to life for us – their courage, empathy and grace. This particular group of actors are shining examples of the best that theatre has to offer; they have been an absolute joy to work with.

It the film version of *Così* released in 1994 the group of patients go on an excursion to Bondi Pavilion to watch a friend of Lewis perform in a play. Having finished our Melbourne production of this play in June, we feel like we are on an excursion bringing *Così* to its rightful place at the big fancy Opera House here in Sydney. Well *Così fan tutte* is an opera right?

# The Writer in Conversation

Louis Nowra

In conversation with Patrick Carey, Content Specialist at Sydney Theatre Company

These days, works of literature that effortlessly blend real events from their author's life with fiction are common place. Since the advent of novels like those by Karl Ove Knausgaard and Elena Ferrante, films like Joanna Hogg's *The Souvenir* and TV shows like Josh Thomas' *Please Like Me*, "autofiction" (a mixture of autobiography and fiction) as it's known, is a mode very much in vogue.

But back in the early-nineties, when Louis Nowra began his Lewis Trilogy, of which *Così* is the second instalment, the practice was not so widespread - at least not in the Anglo-sphere.

The Lewis trilogy is a suite of plays, *Summer of Aliens* (1992), *Così* (1992) and followed up only recently *This Much Is True* in 2017, that follow the eponymous protagonist through three key moments in his life; one in his adolescence, another in his twenties and then, finally, one in his later-middle age. All three plays fictionalise experiences and settings from Nowra's own life.

In an effort to describe the form of *Summer of Aliens*, the first in the Lewis Trilogy, Nowra wrote that the play was, "A black hole of fiction surrounded by a halo of truth". It's a phrase characteristic of Nowra and his great gift for one-liners but it does seem an accurate description of his autofictional plays. In the same way light and darkness define one another, the fictional and non-fictional elements of the Lewis Trilogy inform and enrich each other.

In the case of *Così*, which takes place in a mental health facility in outer-Melbourne in the early 1970s, it was the more unlikely elements of the play's plot that arose from real life. Like *Così*'s innocent young protagonist Lewis, Nowra directed a play with a group of patients from the Mont Park Psychiatric Hospital, north-east of the Melbourne CBD, a facility where, remarkably, both Nowra's grandmothers had spent time as patients.

Despite the singular plot of *Così*, Nowra's insights into the human condition and the practice of theatre continue to resonate widely. "It still amazes me that it still gets 20, 30 productions a year," he says.

*Così* has even found fans overseas, even though it's a play full of uniquely Aussie phrases and energy. "It's just done a two year run in China and I think to myself, 'I wonder how they do that?'" laughs Nowra.

Nowra concludes that, despite their isolation, his characters are very much like everyone else.

"People know these characters," Nowra exclaims. "I get a lot of letters and emails from people, especially amateur productions [of *Così*], who go, 'the actor playing Roy's exactly like Roy! He's a pain in the arse!'"

"I think I hit on archetypes, which is why people love doing it."

The fictional elements of the play, then, exist to enhance the play's resonance, rather than manufacture it.

Both Lewis and Louis directed their shows in the quiet and isolated halls of a hospital while, outside the walls, the fallout from the Summer of Love and the Vietnam War moratoriums were in full swing.

The external context of the events was one of the reasons Nowra decided to have his characters mount a production of Mozart's *Così fan tutte*, rather than Gilbert and Sullivan's *Trial by Jury* - the show Nowra directed in the real version of events. "The thing about *Così fan tutte* was that it's about love but also men pretending to go off to war, so I thought that had nice parallels," says Nowra. "One of the things I loved about it was that [in the opera] love was more important than war."

# The Writer in Conversation

Louis Nowra

The other reason was Nowra's feelings toward the original operetta. He is frank in his assessment: "Look, I didn't choose *Trial By Jury* ... a friend of mine did. I'd never heard of it."

"Then I heard it and I couldn't believe how terrible it was," he laughs.

The characterisation of the Lewis also shifted, despite being a sort of avatar for Nowra in the world of the play (Nowra also appeared alongside the patients of Mont Park as a performer in their play, though he did it out of choice). "I had to create a character who is more naive than I was," Nowra. "The reason why I went to work with patients was because my two grandmothers were in there and my closest friend, in first year of university, had a car accident and ended up in an institution ... just a husk of himself.

Unlike Lewis, who takes the directing job, in the first instance, for the money, Nowra "went in there determined to find out about mental illness."

"What had got to me [interested] was how my grandmothers had changed their personalities. How Jamie [Nowra's friend] had changed," he says.

This determination to learn about the way society both creates and reacts to "different" people became a persevering concern of Nowra's career. Even in his plays set in remote times and places, *The Golden Age* and *Inside the Island* come to mind, Nowra is always interested in the way society separates people from one another, the way it divides.

"They're all about people who are not part of society, they're kind of marginalized. So I'm drawn towards that."

Like many great works of art, *Cosi* is also deeply interested in the creation of art, specifically theatre.

"What *Cosi* is about, is a triumph of theatre," says Nowra,

"How theatre can actually change the way you view the world, how you interact with other people, how you all come together for one single purpose. How pleasurable it is to please an audience who are watching you, to entertain them."

"It is why I think *Cosi* is successful, because it's saying theatre is of great cultural importance, of great psychological importance. ... You're relieved of yourself for those two hours on stage and you become somebody else, and it's just a relief."

Nowra says that theatre's transformative power was most definitely in attendance the last time he saw a production of *Cosi*.

"It's still a favorite play of mine but I haven't seen it for a long time, years," he says.

"The last time I saw it was at the Wayside Chapel, which is a place where you have drug addicts, former drug addicts, people who are mentally ill, and who are lost, who've had bad childhoods. And I wanted to see how they did it."

When Nowra himself performed with the patients of Mont Park, back in the 70s, he said the joy was palpable. "I always remember the euphoria at the end, that we'd achieved something," he smiles.

"Exactly the same thing happened at the Wayside Chapel, which I adored. At the end there was this sigh, this relief. And this euphoria, this feeling of 'we've done it, we've done it!'"



# Synopsis

**The time is 1971. The play is set in a Melbourne psychiatric hospital.**

## ACT I

The play opens with university graduate Lewis arriving at a psychiatric facility where he will be staging a play with the resident patients - it's not his ideal gig but he needs the money. Lewis is initially accompanied by his girlfriend and their friend Nick who is to help him out with the play.

They are uncomfortable at the facility and soon leave, and Lewis is alone to navigate this new terrain. Lewis meets a steady stream of patients arriving to participate in the production. Led by Roy, the most enthusiastic of all, they are a diverse group of characters with a range of reasons for their admittance to the hospital. Lewis is convinced by Roy to stage Mozart's masterpiece *Così fan tutte*. The fact that it is an opera, and in Italian, will not stop this unlikely troupe. The company of actors are cast in their roles and Lewis begins to feel out of his depth. Lewis listens to a radio interview with Nick about the upcoming Vietnam War

moratoriums, which he is supposed to be helping organise. The company begin rehearsals, but Doug is soon forced to leave the cast as he is confined to C ward for lighting a fire in the toilets. It looks like they may have to abandon *Così fan tutte*, until Roy suggests Lewis take on Doug's role.

The play starts to conflict with Lewis' personal life; Nick comes in to help out with rehearsals and when his anti-war politics are revealed, Henry is enraged. Nick leaves, angry and unwilling to work with someone who supports the Vietnam War, unable to rise above politics with compassion for the patients and the project. Lewis, busy with the play and disappointed in Nick's behaviour, no longer helps out with the moratoriums.



Sean Keenan and George Zhao in Sydney Theatre Company's *Così fan tutte*. © Jeff Busby

# Synopsis

## ACT II

Rehearsals heat up and Lewis' personal life takes a hit. Cherry brings shock therapy equipment to rehearsals and she and Roy demonstrate how it is used. She does this to relate the characters' experiences (in *Così fan tutte*) to their own; that the women in the opera might feel more lovingly towards the men if they knew how they were being treated at war.

Soon after, Zac reveals his set design; an empty white room which the cast are disappointed with because it is not dressed with the beautiful scenery they wanted. Instead, it is reminiscent of the wards where they spend most of their time. During rehearsals, there is a black out leading to all kinds of chaos including a kicked bucket, a dropped set model box, and a surprise kiss!

In spite of opening night jitters, stage fright, political differences, and a catatonic performer, the show goes on. Challenges are plenty, but the group learn the ultimate lesson of theatre: it will be alright on the night!



The cast of Sydney Theatre Company's *Così*. © Jeff Busby

# History and Context

## THE VIETNAM WAR

The play is set in 1971 against the backdrop of Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War. The Vietnam War was between the communist North and anti-communist South of Vietnam. Australia became involved in supporting the United States of America, fighting alongside South Vietnam against a perceived threat of communism from the North. "All the way with LBJ" became a well known slogan brought from America back to Australia by Harold Holt, the Prime Minister at the time, who was using it to muster public support for American President Lyndon B. Johnson and the war.

Lewis is a university student and, along with his girlfriend Lucy and their housemate Nick, is active in protesting against the war. Following the Menzies government's commitment to supporting America in the war, many Australians protested our involvement, especially conscription. Conscription is a lottery style enrolment system of young civilian men, forcing them to fight in war. Birth dates were drawn from a barrel, sometimes on television, and young men born on that day were sent to fight. From the age of 20, men qualified for conscription and in *Così*, Lewis and Nick are 21, meaning they are eligible to be called up.

Lewis listens to a radio interview in which Nick states, "Young Australians of my age are getting fed up with our society. We want changes and we want them now!" (Nowra, 1992, p. 17). Nick, Lewis and Lucy discuss organising and attending the moratoriums throughout the play. These characters represent a generation of Australians who were politically aware and often university educated, exercising their right to protest. The 1970s were a time in Australian history when people were becoming more active in public protests.

# History and Context

## THE VIETNAM WAR

At the time, the anti-Vietnam moratoriums were the biggest public protests Australia had ever seen. The moratoriums were peaceful, non-violent direct actions in which people walked out of work and study to unite against the war. Two hundred thousand people participated, mainly in Melbourne and Sydney, staging sit-ins and chanting 'we want peace'. There were people from various student groups, different faiths, professional groups, as well as parliamentarians, all united by their opposition to the war. While these protests were peaceful, it was dangerous to participate. People were arrested for refusing to register for conscription and some of the later moratoriums saw people arrested for protesting. Once conscripted, it was a gaolable offence to refuse service and some men were imprisoned.

William White was a Sydney school teacher and the first Australian to be awarded conscientious objector status during the Vietnam War. White was gaolled after failing to report for

duty once he was conscripted. He is quoted as saying: "They were asking me to go and kill people, and basically that was my objection. I had other objections at the time - I objected to the particular war, I objected to conscription, but basically I objected to the fact that I was being asked to kill another human being." (ABC, 1990). White had to fight for his status as a conscientious objector and spent time in prison until he was excused. There was public support for White and his political message.

The Vietnam War was a very divisive period in Australian history, with people split into two schools of thought; those feeling the war was unethical and problematic, and those believing it was Australia's duty to support America and fight the perceived threat of communism. In the play, Henry's father fought in the Korean War and identifies as a patriot, representing pro-war Australians. When he discovers Nick is protesting the war, he cries "Traitors! Traitors! Traitors!" (Nowra, 1992, p. 46). This intergenerational conflict represents the social and political climate at the time.

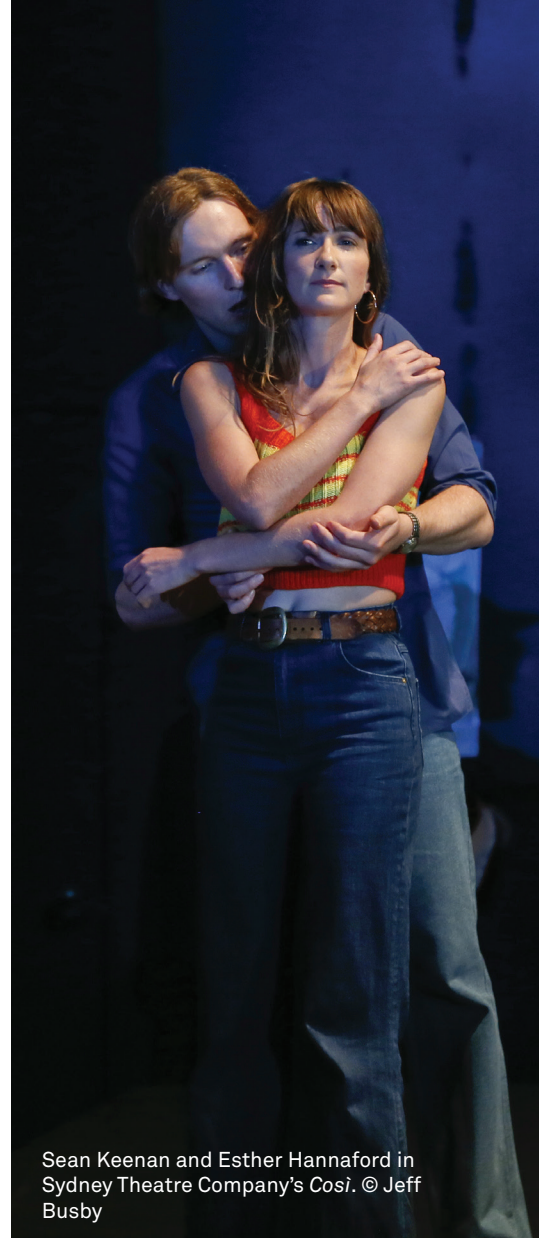


Glenn Hazeldine, Sean Keenan and Gabriel Fancourt in Sydney Theatre Company's *Cosi*.  
© Jeff Busby

# History and Context

## THE SEXUAL REVOLUTION

The 1970s were also a time of women's liberation and the sexual revolution. Lewis is young and unmarried when he arrives at the institution. There are lots of jokes throughout the play about Lewis living with his girlfriend and another friend, with people implying that they are in a shared partner arrangement. Upon hearing that Nick lives with Lewis and Lucy, Doug says: "You share her?" (Nowra, 1992, p. 18). Later in the play when Julie and Lewis are discussing his relationship with Lucy, Julie asks: "You two are into free love?" (Nowra, 1992, p. 32). Later in the play when it is revealed that Lucy and Nick have been having an affair, Nick says: "It's only sex. What's the fuss?" (Nowra, 1992, p. 77). This reflects a changing attitude in society to monogamy and sexual relationships. This historical moment also allows for some of the comedy: Cherry is always flirting with Lewis, offering him food and attempting to kiss him.



# Character Analysis



Sean Keenan in Sydney Theatre Company's *Così*.  
© Jeff Busby

## LEWIS

Lewis is 21 and just out of university. He reads a left wing student newspaper in rehearsals and cares very much about the anti-Vietnam moratoriums, but he gives his time to rehearsing the play and working with the patients instead of helping Nick on the committee. This shows how committed he has become to the production. "Isn't that the first day of your moratorium?" Julie says, to which he responds "this comes first" (Nowra, 1992, p. 64).

Julie realises Lewis is sacrificing his involvement in the protests for the sake of the play and the cast. Later in the play, Lucy says, "Working with these people has changed you" (Nowra, 1992, p. 70). Lewis undertakes a transformation throughout the process as much as any of the patients do.

# Character Analysis



Sean Keenan and Esther Hannaford in Sydney Theatre Company's *Cosi*. © Jeff Busby

## LUCY

Lucy is Lewis' girlfriend and also politically minded, protesting Australia's involvement in Vietnam. She is politically radical and refers to the opera as "reactionary drivel" (Nowra, 1992, p. 70). Lewis says: "She hates me doing an opera about love and fidelity while thousands of Vietnamese are being killed by American troops" (Nowra, 1992, p. 33). Lucy is serious about her political protesting and sees the opera as frivolous, criticising Lewis for how much time he spends at the institution in rehearsals, prioritising the play above organising the protests. Ultimately Lucy loses interest in Lewis because of his changing priorities and becomes romantically involved with their housemate Nick.

## NICK

Nick is Lewis' friend from university. He lives with Lewis and Lucy. He has directed more plays than Lewis and he comes in to help the production. He is initially well received in his suggestions, especially by Roy, but when he reveals his political alliances, Henry feels betrayed and violently opposes him, forcing Nick to leave.



Sean Keenan and Gabriel Fancourt in Sydney Theatre Company's *Cosi*. © Jeff

# Character Analysis

## JUSTIN

Justin is the social worker responsible for coordinating the theatre program. He is Lewis' first point of contact when he arrives at the institution and at times he acts as a conduit between Lewis and the patients.

## ROY

The opera is Roy's passion. *Così fan tutte* is his idea and it is his energy that drives the production. Roy lives in a fantastical world that is not entirely grounded in reality; he recalls a childhood which it is later revealed he did not live. He imagines the world as far more grand and wonderful than the world of the hospital, perhaps as a way of coping with his life.



Robert Menzies in Sydney Theatre Company's *Così*.  
© Jeff Busby



# Character Analysis



## HENRY

Henry is introverted and doesn't talk a lot. He is however passionate on the subject of patriotism and Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War. His father fought in the Korean War and he believes in a country's right to take up arms to defend itself. He has a bag of toy soldiers which he frequently uses to demonstrate his ideas.

## CHERRY

Cherry is one of the patients performing in the opera, she is cast as the maid Despina. Cherry immediately develops a crush on Lewis and is always trying to kiss and feed him to show her affection. She has been institutionalised for some time and seems quite comfortable in the hospital.

## DOUG

Doug is in the institution because he is a pyromaniac (someone with an uncontrollable impulse to start fires). He tells the story of lighting his mother's cats on fire and subsequently burning her house down. During rehearsals, Doug lights a fire in the toilets and is moved to a closed ward.

## JULIE

Julie has been admitted involuntarily by her parents for a drug addiction, and she confides in Lewis that she doesn't want to be there. Julie and Lewis share a brief moment of lust in rehearsals.

# Character Analysis



## RUTH

Ruth is obsessive about numbers and doing things correctly. She counts the number of steps she needs to take in a scene in order to feel comfortable with what she's doing.

## ZAC

Zac plays the piano for the opera. He is quietly enthusiastic about the production but he becomes very nervous in the lead up to the performance, taking a relaxant to make himself feel better. This has a sedative effect and Zac misses the performance.

# Themes and Ideas

## MENTAL HEALTH AND ILLNESS

Historically, people with mental health issues have not always been treated with humanity. In April 2019, the Australian Government launched a Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability with the intention of more fully protecting people living with disability from abuse. This was the result of a Senate Inquiry which found widespread rates of abuse, and recommended the Royal Commission as a result. Considering this history, the play offers a humane and compassionate representation of people struggling with mental illness, and offers the audience an important insight into the lives of hospitalised people with mental health issues.

In the intervening time, mental illness has been largely destigmatised, and treatment is much more accessible and client focused today. The facility in the play represents the time period in which it is set.

As a comedy, *Cosi* makes light of some of the things that can happen in such places. For example, Doug's pyromania, Ruth's obsessiveness, and Roy's imagination are presented not to be made fun of, but to offer moments of comedy in which the audience laugh with the characters and perhaps see elements of themselves on stage. The setting is described by Louis Nowra as "a Melbourne mental institution" (Nowra, 1992, p. 1) and is based on a real life experience he had working on a play with the resident patients at the Mont Park Psychiatric Hospital in the 1970s. He is therefore able to offer personal insights through his writing. When Lewis arrives, the social worker Justin tells him "they are normal people who have done extraordinary things, thought extraordinary thoughts" (Nowra, 1992, p. 5) in an attempt to break some of the stigma Lewis might initially have towards the patients.



Rahel Romahn, Robert Menzies, Sean Keenan, and Bessie Holland in Sydney Theatre Company's *Cosi*.  
© Jeff Busby

# Themes and Ideas

The play also touches on the medicating of patients to manage their illnesses. At one point Zac is described as “soporific” (Nowra, 1992, p. 10) and Doug asks “how much lithium is the poor bugger on?” (Nowra, 1992, p. 11). This suggests some of the side effects the patients might experience are affecting their quality of life. Later in the play when Zac’s medication changes, he says: “A lower dosage. It’s amazing how much more bright the world seems” (Nowra, 1992, p. 62). The play interrogates the notion of sanity and the assumptions that are made about the patients because they are institutionalised, and suggests that they are much more ‘sane’ and ‘normal’ than those living in the outside world. Cherry brings shock therapy equipment to rehearsals and her and Roy act out its application. They hesitate in doing this as they are triggered by the traumatic memories of their own treatments.

## THE POWER OF THEATRE

Described as ‘a joyous love letter to the stage’ (STC, 2018), the play explores the way theatre can create a sense of community and enrich the lives of those who create it. Staging the opera serves the cast of patients and the director Lewis in unique and powerful ways. Through the process they form friendships and gain a sense of achievement. Lewis is engaged to teach them about theatre but ultimately he learns much more important lessons from the patients. Roy says: “The music of this opera keeps the world in harmony” (Nowra, 1992, p. 13).

The play offers the patients something to look forward to, a meaningful activity outside the monotony of their lives on the wards. In spite of the many challenges they face, working together as an ensemble offers the players a sense of community and an opportunity for creative expression. Roy’s energy drives the ensemble. The production was his idea and he is the only one who has ever heard of *Così fan tutte*. He is very encouraging of all the others and he is very invested in the success of the production. He says: “Let’s aim for the stars!” (Nowra, 1992, p. 15).

When the patients incorporate their own experiences into the play, for example including the shock therapy, the experiences of the opera’s characters become much more relatable to them. The play starts to make sense when it becomes about their own experiences. Theatre is most powerful when it is able to reflect the lives and experiences of real people and once the players are able to incorporate their lived experience, the opera comes to life.

When Zac presents his design to the cast it directly reflects

their lives at the institution; the set is stark and features white walls reminiscent of the wards in which the patients live, and the promotional poster is Mozart in a straitjacket. Although they are initially disappointed with this, wanting a more imaginative design, it offers a unique parallel between the opera and the lives of the patients. This is when the experience of the production becomes most meaningful – when it reflects the experience of the patients in the real world. Theatre has the power to affirm our identities when we see our lives reflected on stage.

There is an element of magic realism to the play, which is used to further highlight the power of theatre. The glowing lights and the small moments of magic and whimsy offer the audience an opportunity to experience the magic of theatre as the characters are living it.

# Themes and Ideas



## GENDER

*Così fan tutte*, the opera that the group are staging, portrays women as dubious and untrustworthy. The two female characters in the opera are lured into a trap designed to test their faithfulness to their fiancés, a test they fail. Julie is critical of the gender politics of the play and the way the women are treated. She says: “I don’t like men’s double standards, I guess. Men want women to deceive them because it’ll prove their worst thoughts about women” (Nowra, 1992, p. 33). She is referring to the trap the men set the women in the opera, but she is also conveying a new feminist voice that was emerging at that time in 1970s Australia. The infidelity depicted in the opera is paralleled in the lives of the characters, when it is revealed that Lucy and Nick are having an affair.

Young women were no longer interested in performing subservience to their male partners and started speaking out against sexist attitudes towards them. The introduction of contraception for women meant they had new freedoms and were no longer bound to marry and have children as a matter of course. Lucy says “that’s how they [men] want us to be [true and faithful], even if they’re not true and faithful themselves” (Nowra, 1992, p. 71). She is offering a rebellion to the traditional idea of how women were expected to behave.

## EPIC THEATRE

Elements of Brecht's style of Epic Theatre can be seen in *Così*. The play is making a social statement through its setting, and through dealing with themes and ideas such as the Vietnam War and gender relations it is inherently political. The characters also use signage on stage to indicate settings and scenes to the audience, which is a Brechtian technique. Early in the play Lewis makes reference to a Brecht play he wants to direct with the cast of patients, another reference to the playwright's interest in Epic Theatre.

## PLAY WITHIN A PLAY

The play within a play is a meta theatrical convention that is often used in comedies. The audience of *Così* is privy to the chaos of the rehearsals for *Così fan tutte* and bear witness to the cast as they rehearse and face the challenges of putting on an opera. There are farcical elements to this process, which provide moments of great comedy for the audience. The doubling of the play within a play means the audience gain insight into the actual rehearsal process of the production they are watching.



The cast of Sydney Theatre Company's *Così*. © Jeff Busby

# Classroom Activities



The cast of Sydney Theatre Company's *Così* © Jeff Bus

## DESIGN EXERCISE

Imagine your class is staging a production of *Così fan tutte*, the opera. Using only the resources available to you in your school, design a set for the production. Choose one of the characters from the opera and design a costume for them.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How does the setting of a psychiatric hospital influence the mood and atmosphere of the play?
- Does the political context of the 1970s influence the ideas of the play? How?
- What are the key moments of tension on the play? How were these created?

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