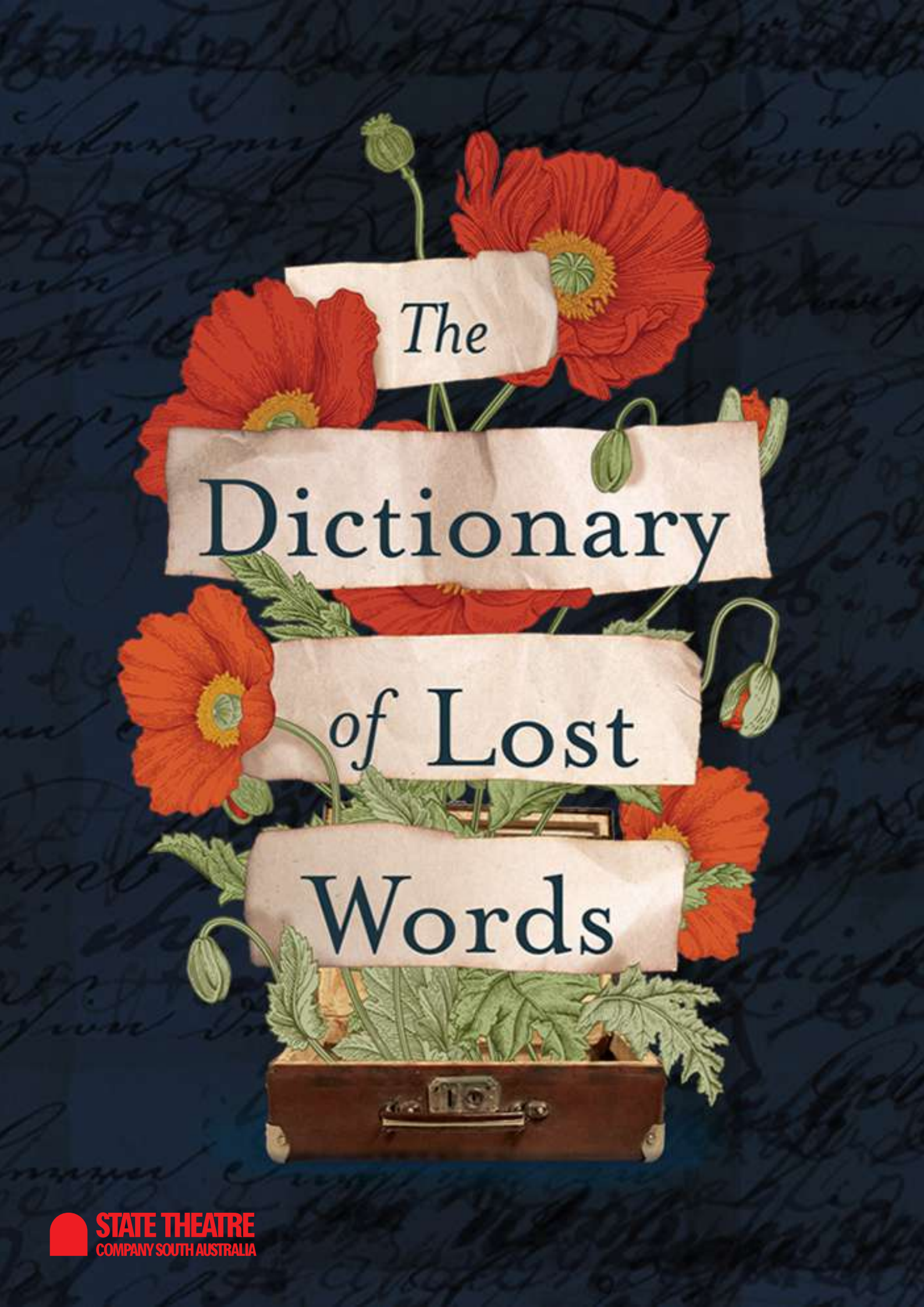


STATE THEATRE
COMPANY SOUTH AUSTRALIA

State Theatre Company South Australia and Sydney Theatre Company presents

THE DICTIONARY OF LOST WORDS

adapted by Verity Laughton from the novel by Pip Williams

SYNOPSIS

“The Dictionary of Lost Words” delves into the creation of the Oxford English Dictionary and explores the untold stories behind the words that were omitted or overlooked in its compilation. Set in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the play centres around Esme Nicoll, the daughter of one of the lexicographers working on the dictionary.

Esme grows up in the Scriptorium, sitting under the desk where her father and his male colleagues work tirelessly to document the English language. As a young girl, Esme becomes fascinated by the words that are excluded from the dictionary. She notes that these excluded words all seem to reflect a female perception, they often have a perceived vulgarity, or observe the gender biases of the time. She begins collecting these “lost words,” hidden away under the ‘scrippy’ table and starts to create her own understanding of the world through language.

As Esme matures, she becomes increasingly aware of the limitations imposed on women in society and the challenges they face in having their voices heard. Through her interactions with the suffragette movement and her own personal experiences, she starts to question the power dynamics embedded in language and the ways in which words shape our perception of reality.

Esme navigates personal relationships, societal changes, and the complexities of love and loss. As she unravels the stories behind the lost words she has collected, she uncovers a tapestry of forgotten voices, narratives, and histories that had been overshadowed by the traditional dictionary-making process.

“The Dictionary of Lost Words” weaves together themes of language, feminism, social change, and the importance of preserving marginalized voices. It paints a vivid picture of a pivotal era in history in the documentation of language, in the Oxford English Dictionary, while also highlighting the words that fell through the cracks and the people and stories they hold.

The play seeks to include words as an active part of the action, via ongoing visual signage. Words and their meanings are core to the story and feature beautifully in the original novel. The script aims to replicate that in the developing visual narrative as well as in the minds of the protagonist Esme and her cohort of lexicographers.

DUNSTAN PLAYHOUSE: 22 SEPT — 14 OCT 2023
SCHOOL PERFORMANCE: 11AM, 26 SEPT 2023

RUNNING TIME
Approximately 3 hours, including interval

SHOW WARNINGS
Contains very coarse language, mature adult themes. Ages 16 +
Please see our 'What to Expect' guide. This can be found on the website here:

Support for State Educate comes from the State Theatre Company South Australia Education Giving Circle and the Education Department of South Australia.

STATE THEATRE COMPANY SOUTH AUSTRALIA

CONTENTS

CREATIVE TEAM & CAST

Author

Pip Williams

Playwright

Verity Laughton

Director

Jess Arthur

Designer

Jonathon Oxlade

Costume Designerr

Ailsa Paterson

Lighting Designer

Trent Suidgeest

Composer

Max Lyandvert

Assistant Director

Shannon Rush

Performer
Tilda Cobham-Hervey

Performer
Brett Archer

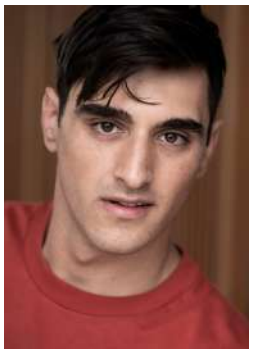
Performer
Rachel Burke

Performer
Chris Pitman

Performer
Ksenja Logos

Performer
Raj Labade

Performer
Angela Mahlatjie



Performer
Anthony Yangoyan

Stage Manager
Jess Nash

Assistant Stage Manager
Carmen Palmer

Costumes made by State Theatre Company South Australia Wardrobe.
Set made by State Theatre Company South Australia Workshop.

VERITY LAUGHTON: PHOTO MATT BYRNE

WRITER'S NOTE FROM VERITY LAUGHTON

Pip Williams' The Dictionary of Lost Words has a long arc from its heroine Esme's 1880s childhood in Oxford, England, to her lexicographer daughter's opening address at the 1989 Convention of the Australian Lexicography Society in Adelaide, Australia.

Between and within those events Esme grows up, word-obsessed, with a bright intellect for which there is no outlet. She accepts each blow of fate, working to find resilience and meaning in her modest, circumscribed, but intellectually busy life. She is radicalised through the suffrage movement but even her activist forays are polite, contained, and wary. She maintains an aura of innocence and a commitment to moral principles to the end.

Esme's actions are often secret, even to herself; she lacks power but makes that work for her; and, whilst her society is enmeshed in great events – Victorian England on the cusp of convulsive change, the striving for the female right to vote, the 1914-1918 First World War at 'home' and in the trenches – the great events of Esme's own life are often internal. This is part of the tender and thoughtful intelligence of the narrative voice in the novel. She is a wonderful – and highly original – creation. In terms of an adaptation, however, she does not drive the action, as the protagonist in a stage play usually would. So to allow her to do so was probably Task #1.

The other striking element of The Dictionary of Lost Words is its tone – circular, patient, persistent, observant, quietly determined, like Esme herself. Task #2 was to stay true to this tone, and to hers (and her creator's!) passion for words themselves.

And Tasks # 3, #4 and #5 might be an interweave of the plot of the stealing of the words/slips and the ripple of events that follow; of the character narrative of Esme, whose attempt to save a remnant of her mother leads to her vocation, but whose mixture of innocence, stubbornness and good nature makes her vulnerable in a damagingly patriarchal world. And the exploration of the theme, to paraphrase Pip Williams' description, 'If words mean different things to men and women, what has been lost in the defining of them?'

It has been a joy to work on this lovely book. In our strident, cut-throat 21st century an affirmation of the bonds of affection, of a clear and idiosyncratically endearing sense of deep moral purpose, of found dignity and quiet courage in context of the arbitrary blows of fate – and charm, don't forget charm in its best sense! – feels timely, a guide for a way through damage and complexity that readers have responded to, and I hope audiences can now access.

VERITY LAUGHTON AND PIP WILLIAMS: PHOTO SHANNON RUSH

VERITY LAUGHTON: PHOTO CLAUDIO RASCHELLA

AN INTERVIEW WITH VERITY LAUGHTON

What drew you to adapting the Dictionary of Lost Words to the stage?

I am very much a 'words' playwright and this novel is about words. It's a beautiful opportunity as an adaptation, compressing a whole world - social history, social change - into this partly fictive, partly real discussion of the making of the Oxford English Dictionary. The conceptual framework of the book is very original - dealing with our linguistic and dialectic inheritance, and what's been forced to remain invisible.

The South Australian connection must have been nice - did you meet with Pip Williams, the author?

Mitchell Butel, Artistic Director of State Theatre Company South Australia, had read the book and approached the author, Pip Williams, about doing an adaptation. Mitchell asked me if I'd be interested in doing the stage adaptation - and I said 'yes' with ungracious speed!
I was able to meet with Pip Williams, she lives in a little town in the Adelaide Hills where my grandparents lived. And the book includes characters who emigrate to Adelaide - which picks up the other major theme: the granting of women's suffrage, which happens in Adelaide way before it happens in the UK.

When you're writing, there's a period when you are really hot, when did that come?

I did the bulk of the work quite soon after getting the commission, which was around 2021 - that's when you really must write, when your intuition and your unconscious mind will feed into the script most strongly. Obviously there have been

changes since, but the first draft included the structure - so once that works you are in a safe place.

The collaborative side is a lot of fun after working on your own, once rehearsals commence.

I like to be at the theatre for the first 7 - 10 days of rehearsal. I like to get the script as right as possible before we go into rehearsal, but inevitably things change when you are on the floor and you have the input of a terrific director like Jess (Jessica Arthur) and good actors. But also, it's not finished until it is in front of an audience and you've been able to calibrate their reactions.

The words are part of the story, how do they move the action forward.

The novel contains many words and lots of letter writing, and I wanted words to be featured and be part of the forward action - so Jonathon Oxlade, our designer will work to realise that in a physical way.
I hope that the play gives the novel's readers the experience that they have treasured in a present, three dimensional way. There are so many wonderful characters. And, while parts of the story are quite sad, it's very funny too - and I hope that comes through in the tone of the piece, and people will have a jo.yous night out at the theatre.

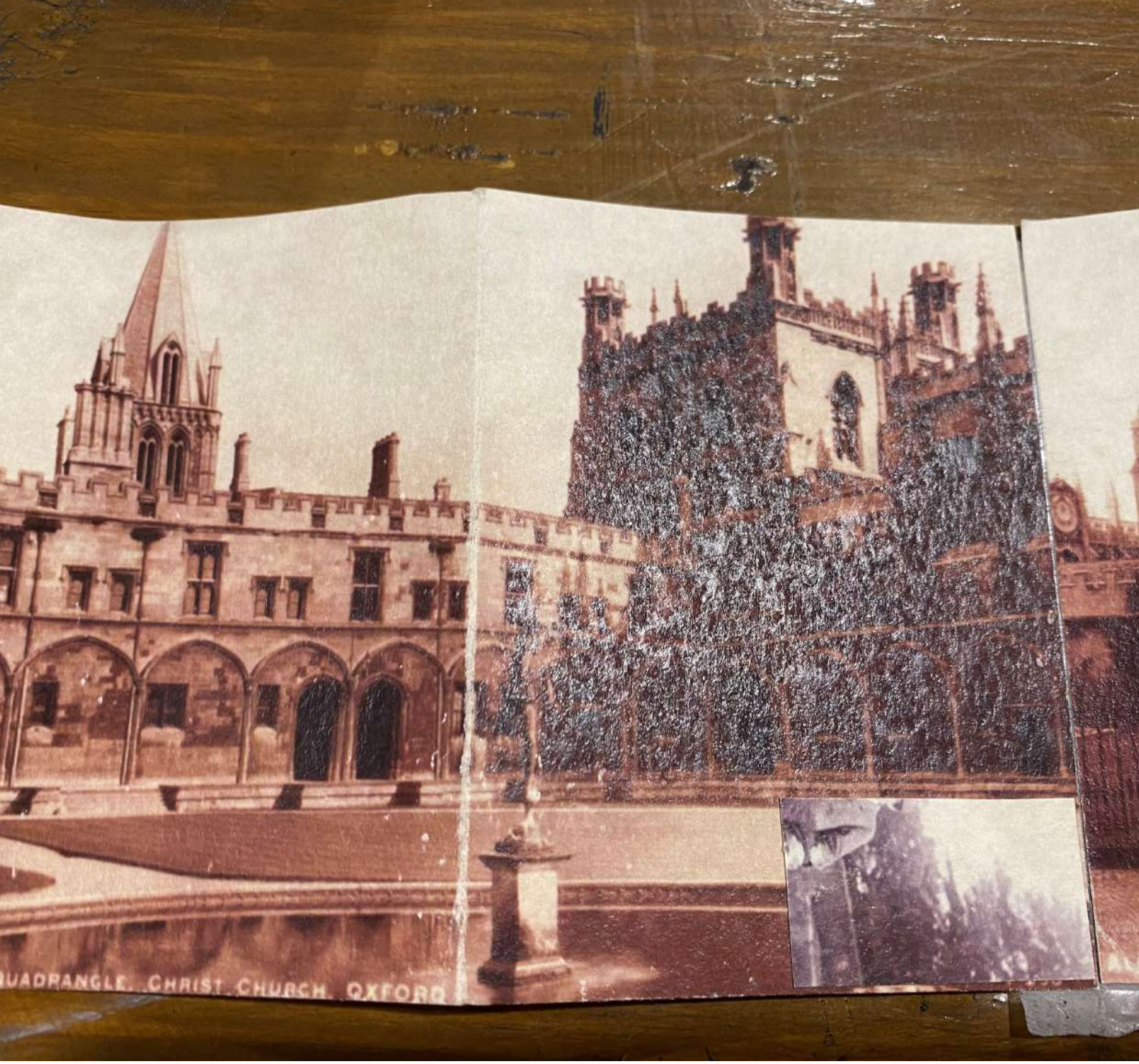
What are the key strategies you use when converting a novel to theatre?

Get the structure right. Simple as that. Work and work until the progression of events is inevitable. That's the intellectual task. The emotional task is to 'land' the characters inside that structure in such a way that they resonate with the audience. And the thematic task is to clarify the throughlines of the play so that the audience can decide for themselves about the issues raised. And finally to get the tone of the novel into the play because when audiences are familiar with a loved novel that's basically what they have come to re-experience.

What are the themes that audiences can expect to take away from the play and do they differ from those in the novel?

The big ones are the impact of language in every aspect of our lives; the historical invisibility of women in a patriarchal culture; and perhaps the power of love to give courage to people to keep on keeping on. I think you can find all three in both book and play; but you may find others. I think people may find their own take on the themes running through the show. There's a moment when a piece is handed over to its audience. They own it in a way the makers no longer do. So I hope it will have its own life, and its own meanings as Pip's book now does for so many readers.

taken from an interviews with Verity Laughton with the Hills Wanderer, and by Beth Keehn for Stage Whispers.



Social context and Setting

To fully appreciate and understand “The Dictionary of Lost Words” it’s helpful to have some context about the historical period, linguistic concepts, and social issues that the play addresses.
The play is set during a time of great societal change, including the suffragette movement and significant shifts in gender roles and cultural norms.

Gender Roles and Feminism

The novel/play addresses the limitations imposed on women’s roles and voices in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The history of feminism, women’s suffrage, and women’s participation in academia and other fields can help you grasp the challenges faced by the characters.

This is evidenced by the women of the play. Lizzie, Edith, Tilda and Mabel all have particular pathways that have been assigned to them through the dictation of how things 'should be' and what society has 'determined'. Esme challenges this. She does not want to follow in these prescribed pathways, whilst Lizzie and Mabel acknowledge their 'station'. Lizzie does not share the beliefs of Tilda in believing women should have the vote. She is quite conservative in her views, and dismisses the ideas that Tilda, Edith (Ditte) and Esme wish to fight for. However she is willing to help Esme through all of the female issues she endures, including the unplanned pregnancy and does not argue against her desire to not be married.

Linguistics and Lexicography

While you don't need to be an expert in linguistics to enjoy the play, having a basic understanding of linguistic concepts like etymology (word origins), lexicography (dictionary-making), and the evolution of language can deepen your understanding of the characters' work and their relationships with words. The recognition that this has been created by men in a world that was very much determined by a male mindset also adds layers to the action of the play. It is against this that Esme is collecting words, that are very much used but not recorded. These words tell a different story to the one that the male dominated dictionary is recording.

Suffragette Movement

The suffragette movement, which sought to secure voting rights for women, is a central theme. Familiarizing yourself with key figures, events, and the broader goals of the movement can provide context for the characters' involvement and the societal backdrop. Muriel Matters was born in Bowden, Adelaide, and is a key figure in the movment of the Women's Freedom League. She was a prominent member of the the suffrage movement between 1905-1924. She is most recognised for chaining herself to the grille of the ladies gallery in the British House of Commons. Whilst attached to the grille, Muriel was judged to be on the floor of the house and thus the words spoken by her are deemed to be the first delivered by a woman in the House of Commons. She is credited for her work in South Australia becoming the first territory to give women the vote.

Language and Power

Exploring how language shapes power dynamics, influences cultural perceptions, and reflects societal values can enhance your understanding of the characters' struggles to give voice to marginalized experiences and ideas. It is this realisation from Esme that leads her to begin searching for the words that challenge this power imbalance.

LOCATIONS OF THE PLAY THROUGHOUT OXFORD:

DIRECTOR, JESSICA ARTHUR: PHOTO: CLAUDIO RASCHELLA

DIRECTOR'S NOTE FROM JESSICA ARTHUR

Esme is a vessel that captures the words, the experiences and the people that fall through the cracks. She is commonly described as a curiosity; yet what she does is very simple, to question and to interrogate, to endeavour to understand lives beyond her own.

The suffragist cause points to how we take our democratic rights for granted. Yet, these rights were fought for against a cynical backdrop that assumed the continuation of the status quo rather than the democratic amplification of the voice of women. We find ourselves again in a cynical, determinist cultural cycle; that manipulates the power of words and amplifies meanings to distortion. Esme teaches through her story weaving with others, not so much the power of words, as the rarity and beauty of truly being able to listen. Listening, the true superpower beyond the words, is the space that makes dignifying others possible.

JESSICA ARTHUR AND SHANNON RUSH: PHOTO CLAUDIO RASCHELLA

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR
INTERVIEW WITH SHANNON RUSH

What would you say are the central themes of the play?

There are many themes within the play, and audiences will undoubtedly have different ideas about what stands out for them. Some clear themes that have emerged are feminism, identity and voice, social change, family and relationships, language and ownership and possession of words, love - in various forms (romantic, familial, motherhood), grief and loss. These are all an essential part of the story.

What is the style/tone of the play?

The play is a period drama that blends period costuming and props, with a contemporary set design.
The style is naturalism with occasional moments of magic realism with a strong element of visual storytelling through the live feed camera. This will help guide the audience through place, and also through action.

What would you say are the significance of the 'Lost Words'?

Esme realises at a young age that the words being included in the OED are words that have been written by men, and are in general use for men. These words are even sometimes being curated for inclusion. Common words that women were using of the time, particularly those that were unlikely to have been recorded anywhere due to class or lack of education, may never make it into the dictionary. Esme endeavours to rescue these words, understanding that they're just as important as the words of men.

Script Excerpt

ESME: But I have a secret, Lizzie.

LIZZIE: Oh, I see. So, I have to drop everything and...What would that secret be, me little cabbage?

ESME shows the slip ('Bondmaid')

LIZZIE: Bit of paper.

ESME: No. A word slip. See. There's the word. And some...not important stuff.

LIZZIE: Where did you find this, Esme Nicoll?

ESME: It found me.

LIZZIE: Like magic.

ESME: Yes! You are exactly right, Lizzie! Like magic. Some words don't make sense and they throw them away. So I took it. To save it. To be kind.

LIZZIE: Kind?

ESME: He discards things he does not like, Lizzie. That is not kind.

LIZZIE: Who?

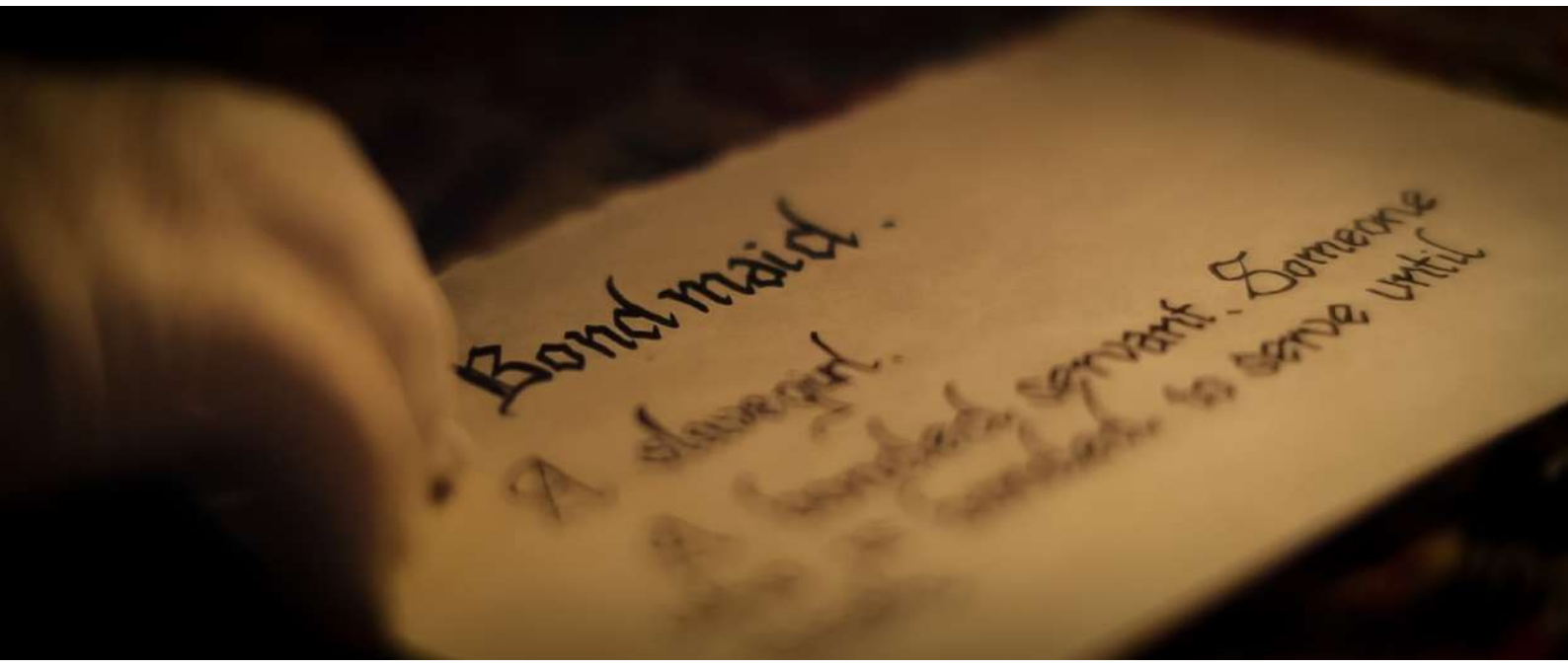
ESME: Mr Crane. One of the assistants. He is not kind.

LIZZIE: To you?

ESME: To me. And we should be kind.

LIZZIE: So?

ESME: So, can you keep my lonely slip for me? That would be very kind.



What next?

Our "What next?" sections include questions and activities based on previous pages. These can be used for individual reflection or as class exercises.

The play weaves together historical facts with fiction. How do the challenges faced by women in the late 19th and early 20th centuries manifest in Esme's life, and those of other characters?
How do the social norms of the time determine the extent to which women are heard?
Think about society currently and make observations about how much power you believe women to have.

CHARACTERS

Esme Nicoll

Esme is the main character, the protagonist. We meet her at the age of 4 as she sits in the scriptorium with her father. She has lost her mother, who died during childbirth and feels the absence keenly but is very attached to her father. She is brought up by her servant friend Lizzie, who takes on a motherly role despite being close in age.
She has a curiousity about her from this very young age. Her inquisitive nature leads her to put her hand in the fire grasping for a slip with her mothers name on it, reaching for some connection with her lost presence.

As a young child her love for words and the dictionary grows, within the safety of the scriptorium, surrounded by the men who are sorting and determining inclusion of words. It is here, in this world of safety and innocence, that she begins to notice that it is a mans world, what appears to start as an 'innocent' collection, perhaps to give herself something special, that is just hers, grows as she collects words that are not deemed appropriate or relevant to the dictionary.

So. This is what I'm doing, Trunk. This is what I am making. Me. Esme Nicoll. Lexicographer. Because these words are treasures, and they are not – they are not! – superfluous to need!

Esme is sent to boarding school in Scotland, where she encounters abuse and is damaged, physically and mentally. It is this experience that pushes her away from the scriptorium and those she previously loved. Her father, Ditte and the dictionary. She returns with a changed view of herself, of her surroundings and her ability to contribute. She is broken, and feels useless.

ESME: /you should have sent me anyway! Except that when I did go there – – to the High School – after Cauldshiels – I was this broken thing, and I couldn't study at all! Not when I got back –

ESME: At the High School! Yes! And now I've failed. Every subject! Unlike the Murray girls. At school they were – and now at the Scrippy, they are – clever and capable and kind! They know what to do at any moment, under any circumstances. Just like their mother who makes everything work for Dr Murray. Can you imagine how he'd do his work without her?

It is from this that Dr Murray gives her work in the scriptorium, and her world begins to change. She feels inspired to go out and find herself in the world. She is drawn to strong women, Tilda Taylor, Mabel O'Shaunnessy, and her bond with Lizzie grows ever stronger.
She determines to find the voice of those women, including herself, who have been denied it. Her collection of words helps her further understand the gendered world in which she lives.
Tilda

TILDA COBHAM-HERVEY: PHOTO CLAUDIO RASCHELLA

RACHEL BURKE: PHOTO CLAUDIO RASCHELLA

Lizzie Lester

Lizzie is Dr Murray's house servant, and Esme's constant presence. She is the mother figure that Esme does not have, despite being not much older than her. It is her that Esme turns to at each critical moment in her life.

She understands her predicament and position in life and bears no bitterness for it. In fact she is a loving and guiding person despite the contraints of her social class and position in the Murray household. She is a stong, assured comfort to Esme, and does not judge her, despite her own beliefs.

ESME: Why do you like needlepoint so much, Lizzie?

LIZZIE: Oh. Because...I clean. I help with the cooking. I set the fires. Everything I do gets eaten or dirtied or burned – at the end of the day there's no proof I've been here at all. But when I make these... they're pretty. And a little bit forever. And I made them. Me. Lizzie Lester. So...it makes me feel like... I exist? Instead of...I don't know. The rest of the time I feel like ...like a dandelion just before the wind blows? Maybe?

Her wisdom challenges the stereotypes we assign to those with limited education or opportunity. She is intelligent and offers a nuanced perspective to Esme, across Tilda's suffragette movement, through Mabel's situation and through Esme's own unplanned pregnancy.
Her strength and warmth make her an essential friend to Esme, and a solid and dependable presence who also grows with Esme's collection of words. She is her "Bostin Mairt", her lovely friend.

Harry Nicoll

Esme's father is a kind and compassionate character. He deeply loves his daughter, he is nurturing, aware of her aching loss of having lost her mother. He too keenly feels the loss of his beloved Lily.
He struggles to address the particular challenges a young woman encounters, her period, even to doing her hair, he relies on the female influence of his good friend 'Ditte', and the work of Lizzie.
He is able to provide Esme with a love of words and language, sitting with her from a young age and discussing language and it's meaning. Bringing her into the world of the Dictionary and the scriptorium. It is this initial exposure to words that leads Esme to discover her own fascination for words.
Whilst he is supportive in educating Esme, in providing her with opportunity, he also fails to defend her from the prevailing attitudes from the men, Mr Crane in particular, in the 'scrippy'.

HARRY: It has become extremely difficult in the Scriptorium. Mr Crane has been quite vocal. I can't take her there. And... anyway, she won't go near the place now, even when Crane's not around. She gets in quite a state.

However, he continues to support her, and endeavours to find ways for her to become an independent woman. Understanding that she will feel fulfilled to be working on the dictionary, surrounded by the words that are gathering importance to her. He is a constant presence to Esme.

TILDA COBHAM-HERVEY, KSENJA LOGOS AND BRETT ARCHER, PHOTO: CLAUDIO RASCHELLA

Script Excerpt

HARRY: Oh Esme.

ESME: And you know why I don't go to the Scrippy! They think I'm a thief!

HARRY: They do not!

ESME: Oh really!? If they didn't – if you didn't! – then why did you send me away? [BEAT] Da, I loved the Scrippy. And now I do not!

HARRY: Ditte says –

ESME: And I loved Ditte. And now I do not!

HARRY: Ditte loves you, Esme –

ESME: Ditte betrayed me! She said she would always be on my side, and she was not! I do not forgive her! I do not!

HARRY: Esme! Please. When you are married and have –

ESME: And I do not wish to be married! Ever! If I am married, I cannot work! Ditte's not married, is she? Nor Beth!

HARRY: Not. Marry?

ESME: You say to me what will I do now? I don't know what I'll do! But I do know that no one is going to let a girl be a lexicographer, or an editor, or a...scholar or...anything really, especially now I've failed my finals, so I don't care about that either!

HARRY: Then what's this?

He pushes some slips of paper across to her.

ESME: Your...your...the top-slips you brought home last night to work on.

HARRY: Read it?

WORD SIGNAGE: HALT

ESME: 'HALT.' Definition. To be lame, walk lame, limp. Quotation. 'The lady shall say her minde freely, or the blanke Verse be halt for it.' Shakespeare, 1599.

HARRY: 'Halt'. Yes. Well. But whose writing is this, with this new quotation?

ESME: Mine.

HARRY: It captures a sense that wasn't there.

ESME: I thought so, too. I took away the quotation that didn't suit and put this one there instead. Sometimes I think the volunteers get it quite wrong. This was one of those times.

HARRY: Could you pour me another cup of tea?

ESME: Of course.

She does

HARRY: What about the Dictionary, Esme? Do you dislike the Dictionary now, too?

ESME: Da?

HARRY: An answer, please.

ESME: The Dictionary. Is...

HARRY: Come on.

ESME: It is...the most magical endeavour I can begin to imagine. To name. And record the means by which we – well, the English-speaking 'we' – encapsulate and understand the world. I think... the Dictionary. The project. Itself. It is a mighty.... and exhilaratingly wonderful thing.

HARRY: Esme, Dr Murray has suggested that since you are not otherwise occupied, you come to the Scrippy and work as my assistant. The Dictionary is so behind. The letters H (English pronunciation = 'aitch') to I. What monsters they've been! We are 'halt' ourselves without more help!

ESME: Da?

HARRY: You'd sort the post. Write replies to letters of appreciation, return books and manuscripts to libraries, and run errands to the Press. You would be paid. Not much. But you would have your own income, like the two Murray girls already working at the Scrippy do. You would have a desk, also like them. But if you are still too sad or angry or disappointed to manage this, then of course you need not.

ESME: Da...?

HARRY: Are you still too sad, Esme Nicoll, my invisible girl?

Gareth Owen

Gareth works as a compositor at Oxford University Press. Like Harry, Gareth is kind and supportive. He sits outside of the men who dismiss women, we discover his mother was a single mother who worked hard. A fact that he admires and respects. He is wholly supportive of the suffragette movement and willing to march with the women, and speak up to men who hurl abuse.
He recognises Esme's intelligence, her hard work and her struggle against the power that men have over her destiny.
It is his unconditional love that breaks down Esme's resistance to the idea of marriage, proving that being loved does not equate to being owned, which was a radical concept during her lifetime. Gareth's genuine affection and support offer Esme a profound understanding of love and partnership. His ultimate gesture of love is to secretly put her collection of lost words to print and present to her, in place of a ring.

RAJ LABADE, PHOTO: CLAUDIO RASCHELLA

Tilda Taylor

Tilda is an actress and a suffragette that Esme meets whilst at the covered market. Esme is drawn to the strength and confidence that Tilda exudes. She is an influential figure for Esme, linking her to the Emmeline Pankhurst's Women's Social and Political Union. Acting, or art in general, can be a freedom of expression, and for Tilda, being a woman during this time is very constricting.
For her to have the theatre and use powerful plays as a way to express AND cleverly disguise her politics is so bold and brave and absolutely aligns with her fight for women to be seen and heard.
She is quite unlike anyone Esme has encountered previously, she has liberated views on sexuality and a modern perpective on women's rights in 20th century England. This is in striking contrast to the conservative position of Lizzie, who has til now been Esme's main influence.
Tilda has an unwavering desire and determination to embrace life, exploring freedom and her rights to the fullest. This serves to push Esme to challenge her own wants and desires. Despite their differing approaches, Tilda direct and actively risk taking, they remain strong friends, both fighting for the same thing.

ANGELA MAHLATJIE, PHOTO: CLAUDIO RASCHELLA

Dr James Murray

Dr James Murray is a scottish lexicographer interested in etymology who has undertaken the task of compositing an inventory of words used in English from the time. Construction of the 'dictionary' is grounded on strict historical and descriptive principles. Each definition must be accompanied by an example, including date and author.

He has a traditional view of women, however he does encourage his daughters to work in the scriptorium and offers Esme a job there, understanding her love and aptitude for the etymology of words. Whilst he is unlikely to be fully supportive of all the methods undertaken by the Suffragette movement, we get the sense that he is not entirely opposed to recognising the work of women. We understand he is a good man.

Edith 'Ditte' Thompson

Edith is Harry's friend, and contributor of words to the Dictionary.
She, along with her sister, was a major contributor to the Oxford English Dictionary from the first publication to the last, uncredited contributor in the play.
Ditte is someone in the world of the piece who maintains a position of privilege, comparatively, as a female. She is independently wealthy, and thus able to do the work, and choose the company, that interests her. She moves through her world with the confidence and status that this conveys, even whilst understanding the limitations of being a female in that world. Her 'sacrifice' is that she could not have children, or a husband, of her own and maintain the liberties she enjoys. Esme, Harry, and her sister Beth fulfil the role of family for her. Ditte is pragmatic, intelligent and confident, and with a genuine warmth, loyalty and love for her chosen family.

Mabel O'Shaughnessey

Mabel is a survivor, scraping an existence on her own terms, in a world that offers her very little. Her nihilism presents as mischievousness and humour, as she has nothing left to lose. She is the fool of the play; the brash truth-sayer. She represents the working classes, but more specifically what one might (these days) call 'the precariat' – those who, for whatever reason of birth or misfortune find themselves in a precarious position financially and live or die by their wits.
Mabel has been in the profession of prostitution, and now she sells her whittlings at her tiny stall at the Covered Market. She has a roughness to her, an edge brought about by having to survive. She has little power, or standing of any note, no 'voice' to speak of, however she has a great strength. She has lived a life full of experience, one very different to Esme and Lizzie. She is someone that would often be dismissed, but it is this that attracts Esme to her. Esme's 'curiousity' to this world she has not been privy to, the understanding that Mabel does have something to offer cements her drive to record the words that are not included, the language and thus the experience of a whole demographic of the society, women, working class, and under privileged. This 'vulgar' language would never make it's way into Dr Murray's dictionary and Esme sees this as a language of the lives of women, that they existed.

ESME: Well. Thanks to Mabel, I am familiar with that word already. But you're right. The Editors don't like it. "Too vulgar to include in the Dictionary".

Bill Taylor

Bill is Tildas younger brother, he is perfectly charming, again he is kind. We discover that he is part of the theatre set, assisting Tilda in her endeavours with behind the scenes, her Jack of all trades, box office, props, costumes and accounts. He is supportive of the work she does, on stage and off. He supports her in her fighting and position within the Suffragette movement.
He is charming, he and Esme connect as friends, and then later in their honesty and directness about what they want.

BRETT ARCHER, JESS ARTHUR, PIP WILLIAMS, KSENJA LOGOS, RACHEL BURKE AND TILDA COBHAM-HERVEY, PHOTO: CLAUDIO RASCHELLA

INTERVIEW WITH TILDA COBHAM-HERVEY

Whilst this play covers so many themes and ideas I ultimately see it as a coming of age story. It follows a young woman coming to understand herself and find her freedom in a world that doesn't recognise her. This is only made possible through her connections with many different women, from all walks of life. It reminds us that we need to celebrate people from all different backgrounds, people with different opinions and unique perspectives. Change is only made through ideas being challenged. We can only grow as people and as a society through deep collaboration. Esme's almost forensic attempt to save all missing words leads her to connect with women like Mabel,Tilda, Lizzie and Ditte who she would not necessarily come in contact with otherwise. Although we follow Esme in this story it is the way these women connect that is the heart of this story. The women all come together and in their own way attempt to rewrite history for the next generation of women. Although it is set in a very different time period many of the conversations still translate to issues today. Women being recognised in male dominated industries, the freedom to choose, shame around female sexuality and the importance of intersectional feminism to create real change.

On Esme's Key characteristics

Esme is curious and inquisitive, she is incredibly book smart and yet can also be incredibly naive. She is independent, determined, resilient, an original thinker, she is a keen observer and all this leads her to question the biases and limitations of the dictionary and to champion a more inclusive and representative approach to lexicography.

On relationships with the other women in the play

From Mabel she learns - new words that help her articulate the female experience. Mabel possesses language that is not represented in the dictionary but Esme comes to believe that they are no less valuable or worthy than the words that are included. She also comes to understand the many varied ways that women can live and survive that are wholly different to her own experience.

From Lizzie she learns - to confront her privilege. Through her friendship with Lizzie she learns how the working class are marginalized and through lack of education often left voiceless. She also learns that true friendships can transcend class and social norms.

From Ditte she learns - that she can be successful and independent as a woman. She is a mentor and inspiration to Esme who acts as a mother figure. Ditte shares her love of words and introduces Esme to the idea that words can shift perspectives.

From Tilda she learns - about the suffragette movement.Tilda is constantly confronting social structures to force change and fight for equality. Esme is very averse to conflict but Tildas commitment to this cause helps Esme understand the systemic injustices women face in society. Tilda also teaches her about the joy of female sexuality.

CHRIS PITMAN, ANGELA MAHLATJIE, RAJ LABADE, ANTHONY YENGOYAN PHOTO: CLAUDIO RASCHELLA

What next?

Think of the relationship between the characters. What are the defining characteristics of the men? What drives them?

Esme has relationships with many people, analyse the dynamics that exist with each of these, ie Lizzie and Tilda. How do these relationships shape her experiences and perspectives?

How does Esme's friendship with Lizzie offer a window into different social classes and their respective challenges?

What does the character of Mabel provide us?

SET DESIGN - PHOTO: FIONA LUKAC

DESIGN ELEMENTS

AN INTERVIEW WITH JONATHON OXLADE DESIGNER

In the weeks preceding the start of rehearsal the Designer presents what is known as a Final Design Presentation. This is a scale model of the set, set within the correct venue, presented to the production department and the company. This is to enable the Production Department, the workshop and wardrobe team to ensure that the build of the set is achievable and will easily be able to fit each of the venues that it tours to.

It also provides the education and marketing teams with information regarding the design and the costumes. The process leading to this point involves many conversations with the Director and the Designer as they mine the text and also create the visual world presented in the themes. It needs to represent the storyline of the writer as the Director sees it.

Jonathon and Jessica (Arthur - the Director) spend many months prior to the rehearsal discussing the set, the script provides information, in this case the playwright has provided notes on the set, for example: the play seeks to integrate the very old university town of Oxford (a centre of intellectual life in England for some hundreds of years) as an active ingredient in the narrative. This ensures that the designer and the director include this in their discussions and models.

PROJECTOR IN THE REHEARSAL ROOM PHOTO: FIONA LUKAC

How did you address the issue of the time period, and the multiple locations in the play?

The play moves forward in time covering nearly 100 years, we decided that rather than using sets to tell or indicate the jumps, we would use ephemera and found objects in close up, as projected imagery. A camera is placed overhead onstage to pick this info up from a table.
Ephemera are things that exist or are used or enjoyed for only a short time, of no lasting significance.

Following this, can you talk to the role of the projections in the production?

The projection sits at the top of the set and spans across the stage as a slim panorama. The idea is to list the time and location through found materials like postcards, toys, text on slips and letters and show the ‘making’ of these assemblages through live feed. The performers build these assemblages live. They are working to make them during the performance.

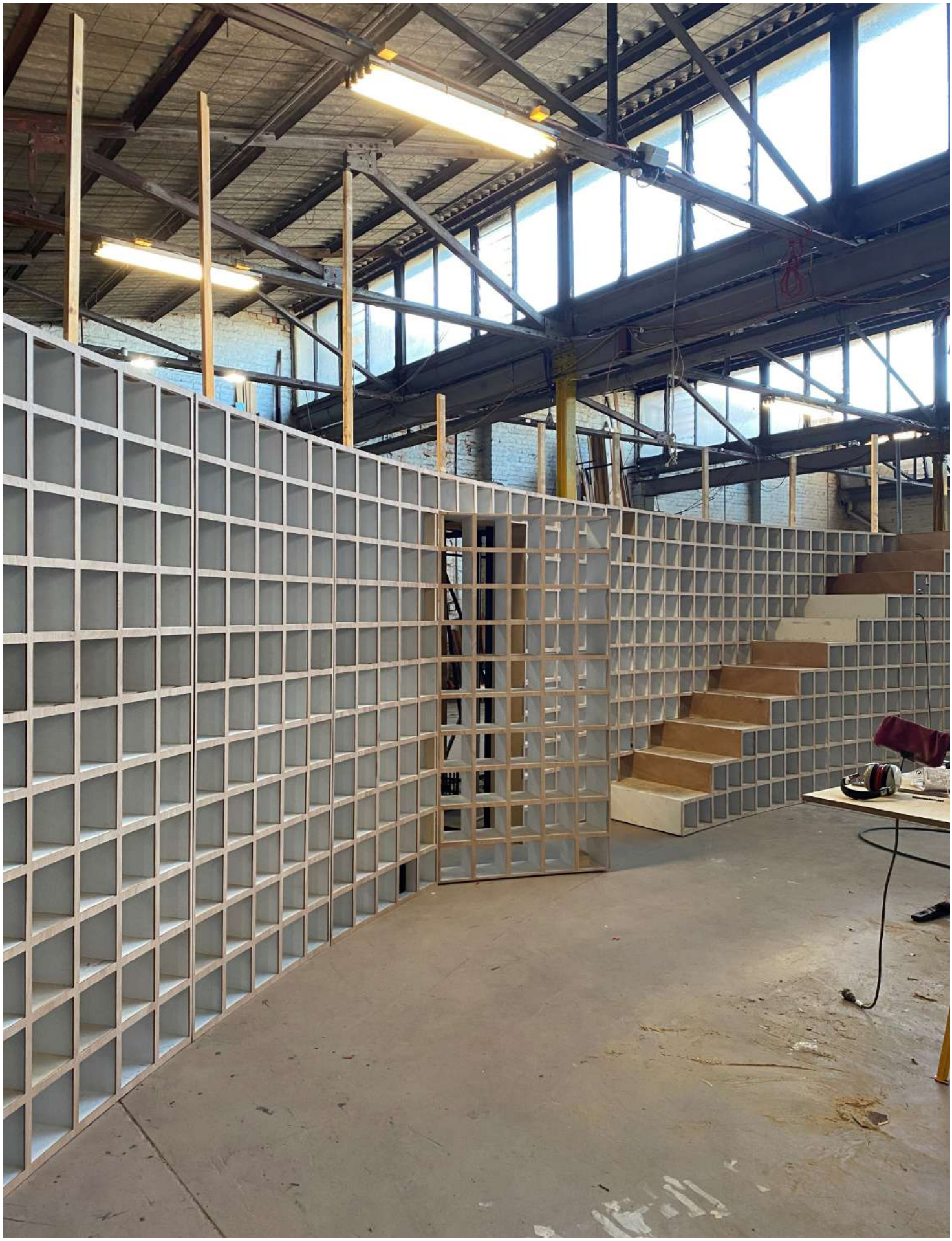
EPHEMERA PHOTO: CLAUDIO RASCHELLA

Do you look to incorporate some of the themes from the play into the set?

The story centres around correspondence, letter writing, books, hand made objects and documents. We are trying to show the detail behind these through close ups in the projected work. Also the scriptorium where the dictionary is assembled acts as a character on stage, providing the time and feel of the period. fire alarm and safety signs point to the risk adverse focus.

Are there any challenges working with period costumes and designing a set suitable for this?

Long skirts were prominent in the 1900's, so making sure steps are wide and deep enough for performers to move freely is paramount. Also, in contrast to today hats and coats were left at the door on a stand or rack. We still do this today, but more as a seasonal necessity rather than politeness. There are also wigs involved, which adds to the practicality of costume changes, movement and action. Actors will often wear long skirts, and shoes during rehearsal to ensure they are comfortable and able to move.



SET BUILD STATE THEATRE COMPANY WORKSHOP, PHOTO: FIONA LUKAC

COSTUME DESIGN
WITH AILSA PATERSON

Period costume is always exciting, but also quite challenging - what are some of the challenges you have found?

The costume design for this how is particularly challenging because it spans more than 100 years in time! It was necessary for me to find a way to show key shifts in silhouette as time is passing in the narrative, while maintaining a clear audience connection to character. I achieved this by creating a particular colour profile for each character and connecting them to a key fabric, so the various garments they wear are cut from the same cloth. I can add and subtract layers and do some manipulation of skirt shapes to align with the features of the time in which the scene is set. It is also challenging to show the ageing of characters when the time available for transitions is very limited. This has involved some wig changes, greying of hair, addition of paunches, glasses or canes, and the lengthening of beards in some cases!

How do you design costume that covers such a large span of time?

I have conducted extensive research into the fashions of the key time period (1886 – 1915), with a focus on images of Oxford scholars and the women who worked on the dictionary. The later setting for the end of the play is 1989, requiring a complete shift in aesthetic. I have tried to distil the key elements of silhouette change in the characters we follow for the whole narrative. Menswear always changes at a slower rate than womenswear, so we see that the men have fewer and more subtle changes. When a new character is introduced, it is an opportunity to really solidify the qualities of the year or decade in which they are existing. When there is a shift in skirt shape, the new padding required is built into the added item, rather than requiring a complete change of corset and petticoat.

MABEL COSTUME: STATE THEATRE COMPANY WARDROBE, PHOTO: FIONA LUKAC

What are some of the tricks to ensure the quick changes that the actors need to do?

The many quick changes are assisted by a lot of layering of garments. We are also creating 'dicky' shirtfronts, with ties already in place, which simply slip over the head and change the appearance of the shirt and collar. Some of the more complex character changes, for example Ditte into Mabel, are made possible by combining the elements of Mabel's costume into one huge coat which sits on top of her base costume. I have tried to establish a base costume for each performer, which remains the same throughout the show. This includes shoes and undergarments. This is particularly challenging when a performer is playing both male and female roles! Anything with buttons or tricky fastenings is 'quick changed' with a combination of Velcro and press studs to make everything a bit faster.

How valuable is it knowing you have a strong making team to deliver your costumes?

The skill and experience of the making team is crucial in the building of this show. I have been working with this team for many years now and I know that they have a particular brilliance when it comes to period costuming and creative solutions to complex character changes. They are extremely hard working and passionate about the work that they do, and I am incredibly grateful for the skill and devotion they exhibit. The sheer volume of garments in a show like this is quite overwhelming, we rely heavily on the stock owned by State Theatre, as there would not be time to make every single look from scratch. It is an advantage to use stock items that have a sense of age and wear as it saves breaking down garments to look aged once they have been created.

MARTINE MICKLEM, WARDROBE, PHOTO: FIONA LUKAC

ESME COSTUME DESIGN, AILSA PATERSON PHOTO: FIONA LUKAC ©

SET DRESSING

AN INTERVIEW WITH ELIAS PPIROS, PROPS AND SET COORDINATOR

State Theatre Company South Australia has two props and set dressing coordinators for this production. Stuart Crane, who works on a regular basis across all productions, and Elias Ppiros, who recently worked with the company on The Goat, and created the prop goat that was used across the season. Due to the sheer scale of the production the collection and creation of props and set dressings required additional staff. The role of props coordinator requires constant liaison between the Designer and the stage management team. During a rehearsal process the cast will need to be working with the hand held, and set dressings that will be part of the final set. So collection of these items will need to happen as soon as the actors are in the room and up on the floor. For this production this happened at Week 1. Which meant that the sourcing was happening in the weeks before the rehearsal process started.

What is your process for identifying what props are required for a show?

The props process begins with initial briefings from the production designer. In these initial briefings the designer will present a props list, which has been extracted from the script, this list contains all of the prop items used throughout

the show and how many items are required. The designer then forwards some references for all of the props and we start hunting to track down what the designer is after. It is also the job of the prop team to organise all set dressing and other forms of props that are not necessarily hand props used by the actors. The process of identifying what these items are is run in conjunction with the main hand props sourcing.

Have you sourced or created the props/set dressings for this play?

Many of the props in The Dictionary of Lost Words have been sourced as they are time period items. In saying that, a lot of items have also been custom made to suit the needs of the panoramic camera shots, we have a set shoot size for the camera view and we need to make items fit within this view to be seen across the panoramic set, items too big won't be seen in shot and items too small will look miniscule on projection.

Trickiest thing to source and why?

Unfortunately in South Australia period props are one of the trickier groups of props to source as a lot of the smaller antique and treasure shops have recently shut down during COVID. The remaining antique stores don't always have what we are after as they are more sought after items, being sold less regularly in our state. Luckily there are still a few really good rare book shops in the city that had some of the exact items we were after! If we are unable to find the exact items that are wanted we can always make the item or, if it is not seen close up, use a different item that will look the part just enough to make it plausible.

LIGHTING DESIGN
AN INTERVIEW WITH TRENT SUIDGEEST

How would you describe the lighting design for The Dictionary of Lost Words?

In one word I would say it needs variety. We move through so many locations and passings of time, that the lighting needs to evoke many different atmospheres and psychological spaces.
It's also a transitional play, we need to move between scenes with great ease, so finding our way through those rhythms together with sound and projection is going to be how the lighting lands effectively.

With a play having so many locations, and cast, what approach do you take with lighting?

I have started by designing a base rig that allow me to effectively light every possible trafficable portion of the stage in a flattering and sensitive way so that the actors can be well lit wherever required. Now it's about layering up what we call 'specials', sometimes single purpose lights in the rig to give a particular scene or moment an extra edge or colour, to evoke a representation of a location or a highlight for a monologue.

How does the presence of projections change or affect your lighting design?

Projection and Lighting need to work so closely with each other so that the overall image onstage is harmonious. I often joke that a projector is the one light source I don't have control over - but it is a reality - so the conversation needs to be open and friendly. The conversation is often talking about adjustments in fade times, colour balancing and brightness so that one department can take the lead in a given moment, or both design components can sing together.

They are also the final elements that come together in the theatre so changes need to be swift which is traditionally quite difficult with rendered imagery in projections.

This time is quite different and exciting for me with the projected images, there is a lot of playing in the rehearsal room because they are a physically practical part of the image making, so we are planning the projected images alongside the staging of the show and the actors are manipulating those elements live.

However we don't get to see the exact brightness, bounce off the set and final colourings until we are in the theatre.

So we are building some useful abilities into the way we are lighting the projected image components: we are able to change the colour inside a light box that sits beneath the crafty image making, and we can also colour change the lamp above

which is part of the camera rig. So we are then able to temper the colours of those images that end up on the back wall, and within the cueing of the lighting I can morph the projections with colour and intensity, to make the full stage pictures harmonious.

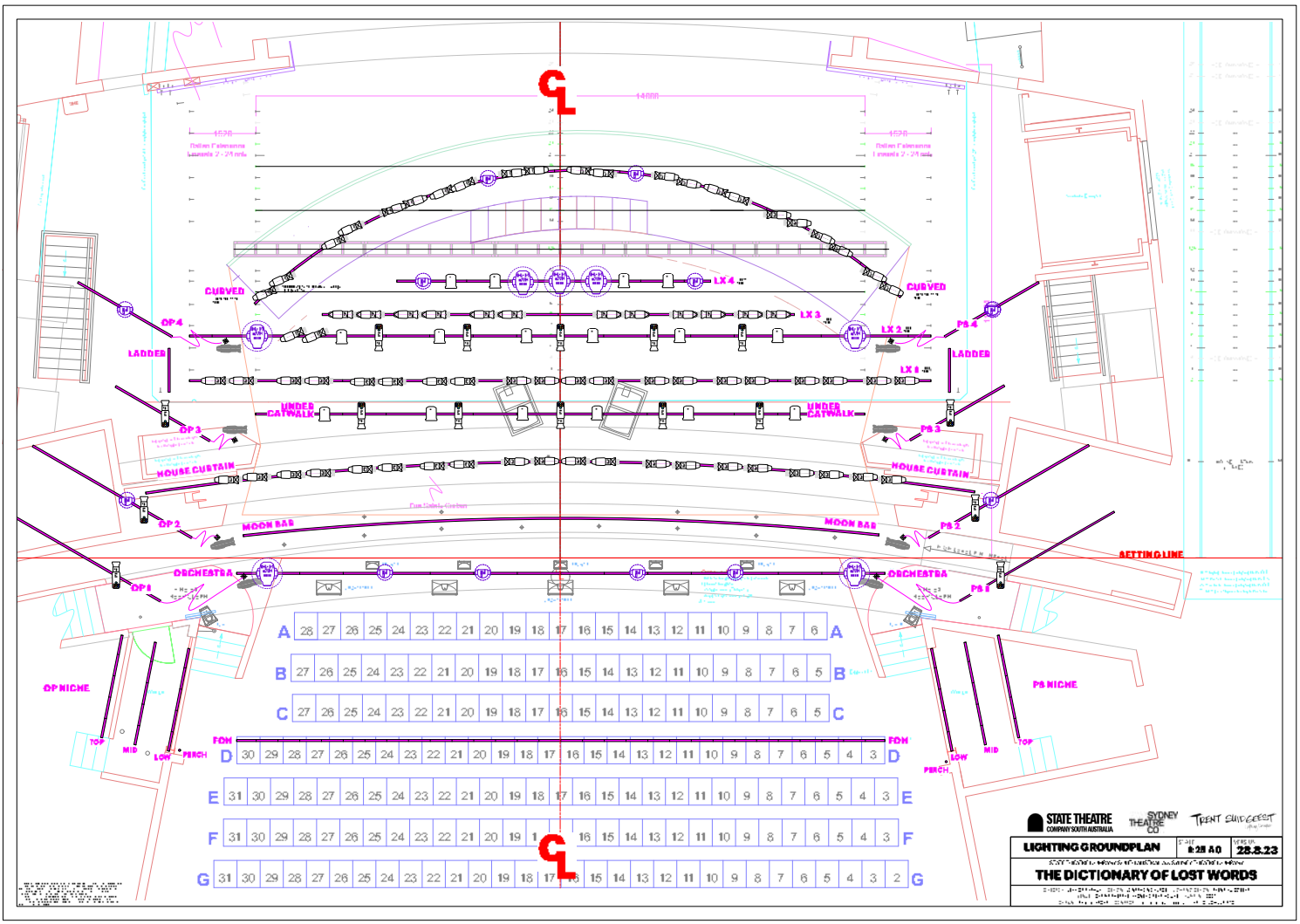
What moments do you look at the lighting and feel delight - those 'yes, that has worked' moments? If any?

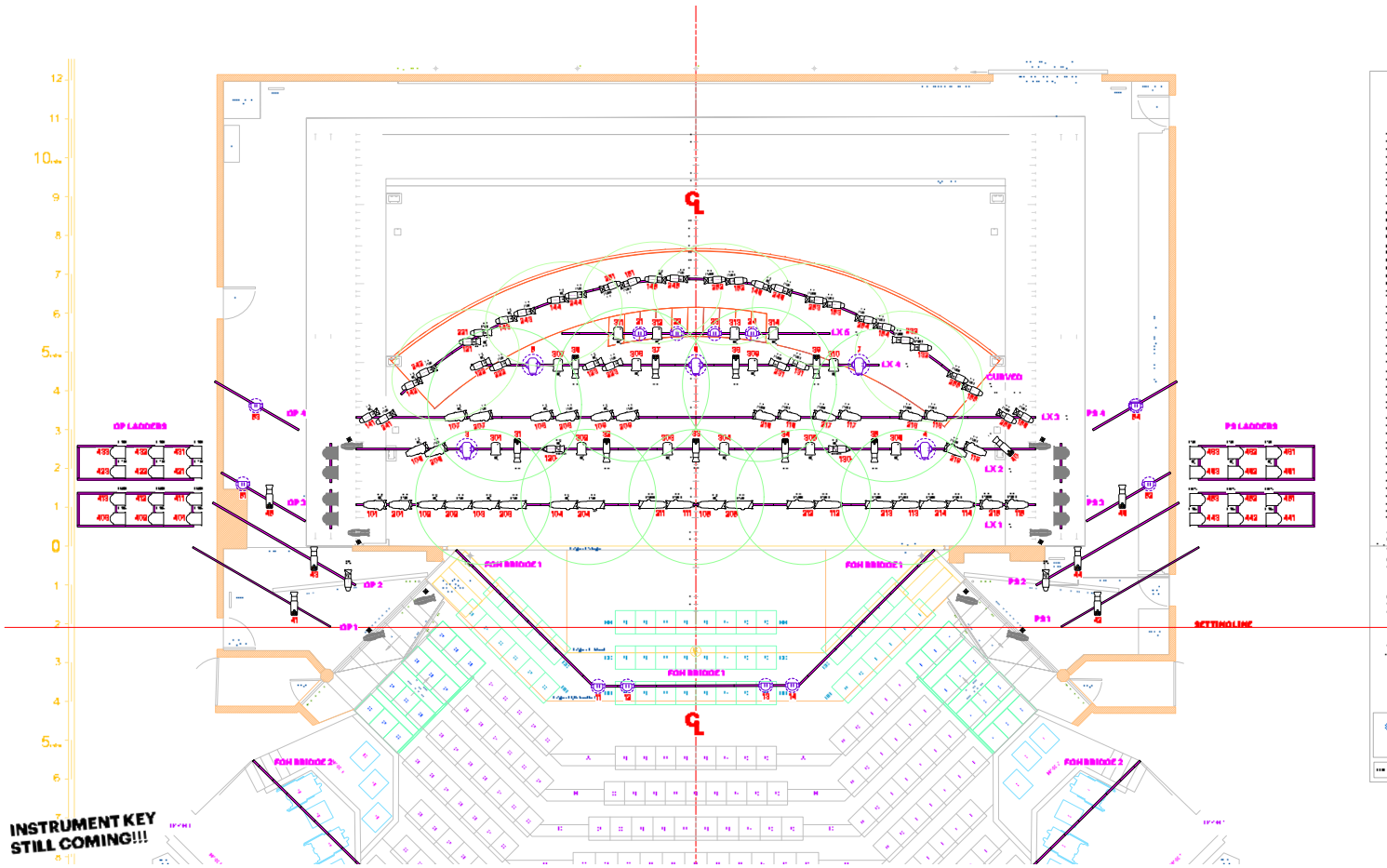
The greatest moments of delight are always when design and action all converge in the clearest version of the story being told. Sometimes the lighting contribution is overt, often it is imperceivable in guiding the audiences attention, helping convey a location or shifting the temperature to trigger psychological responses in the audience. Sometimes we want to create some mystery through how much we can see, sometimes we want very stylistic bold lighting with saturated colours and shifts. If it's supportive, it's delightful to me!

What next?

Think of the design process and the set, costume, lighting and sound for this play. Taking into consideration the information above, create a palette for your own design. Gathering images to create a feel for the space, pull these together in a mood board.
How would you create a set to support the story of the play? Discuss the realism in the set and the technical components that help direct the story. How might this present challenges for the team?
Why are the props so important?

For lighting, decide on whether you would use a naturalistic style, and how this might change as the play progresses..





PARTIAL LIGHTING DRAWINGS FOR SYDNEY OPERA HOUSE and THE DUNSTAN PLAYHOUSE BY TRENT SUIDGEEST

SCRIPT EXCERPT

ESME: But there's blood! And my tummy hurts so much! I'm dying Lizzie!

Enter LIZZIE, (aged 19) who takes in the situation immediately.

LIZZIE: Oh Essymay....

ESME: Lizzie?!

LIZZIE: Essymay. You're not dying. Don't you remember what I told you about older girls and the blood?

ESME: No. Yes. But I'm not older.

LIZZIE: Nearly thirteen is old enough. For some. In this case, you. The Monthlies, Essy. Remember?

ESME: I forgot.

LIZZIE: Move over now, Essymay. I need to get to – this – box. That's right, over here. Maybe you wanted to forget.

ESME: How could I 'want to forget'?

LIZZIE: How would I know that? (beat) Now. Me night shift. Here! You take that skirt off. And the underthings. That's right. Here's a belt. And rags. You see if you can fix them. I'll take these and rinse them and they can dry by the range.

ESME: Stay with me, Lizzie!

LIZZIE: Your clothes won't clean themselves, Essymay.

ESME: How long will the blood last?

LIZZIE: A week. Maybe less. Maybe more.

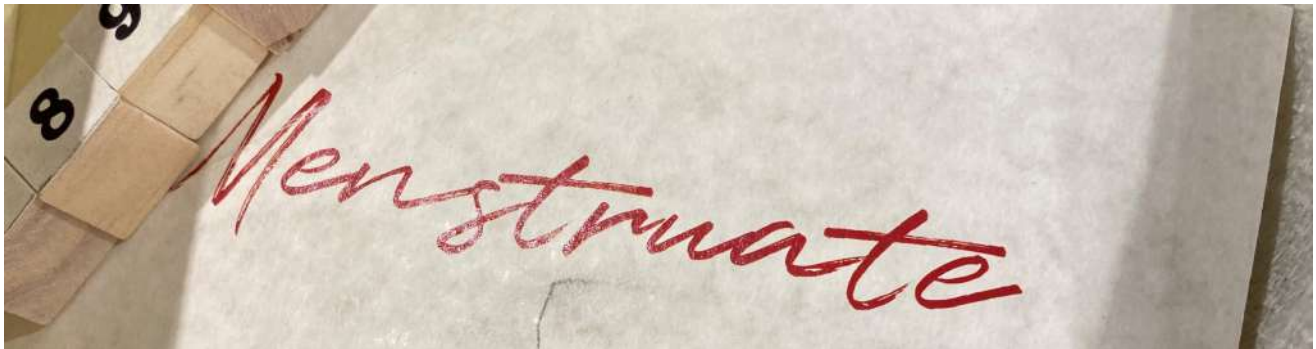
ESME: Every month?

ESME: All women?

LIZZIE: All women.

ESME: But why does it happen? What's it for?

LIZZIE: It's to do with babies.



THEMES & CONCEPTS
IN *THE DICTIONARY OF LOST WORDS*

Gender roles and Feminism

The play addresses the gender biases present in historical linguistics and the societal limitations imposed on women during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Esme's journey involves discovering how words related to women and their experiences were often neglected or negatively depicted in dictionaries of the time. The suffragette movement plays a significant role in the narrative, highlighting the struggle for women's rights and representation.

Identity and Voice

Esme's journey is a quest for identity and voice. She navigates her evolving sense of self as she confronts societal norms and expectations. Her exploration of lost words becomes a metaphor for the lost voices and experiences of women, minorities, and marginalized groups throughout history.
The concept of "lost words" not only refers to forgotten language but also to lost experiences, emotions, and histories. The play examines the ways in which individuals and societies remember or forget, and the significance of preserving the stories that are often left behind.

Social Change

The novel is set during a period of significant social change, including the suffrage movement, technological advancements, and shifts in societal values. These changes are mirrored in Esme's personal growth and her increasing awareness of the world around her.

Family and Relationships

Esme's relationships with her father, colleagues, friends, and romantic interests form an emotional core of the story. These connections impact her perspectives on language, identity, and her role in society. She spends her younger years connected strongly to her father and Ditte, until she feels betrayed by them. The decision to send her to boarding school is life changing for Esme, she returns broken, and damaged. This pushes her into new friendships, she seeks out the market, and thus Mabel, leading her to Tilda, and Bill. The relationship she has with Bill is also irrevocably life changing.

Language and Words:

Central to the play is the theme of language itself. The story delves into the power of words, their meanings, and their ability to shape perceptions of the world. It highlights how language can both empower and marginalize individuals based on social, cultural, and gender contexts.

LOCATION IMAGE: SIGNAGE: OXFORD, THE COVERED MARKET, 1902

Mabel's wooden-crate stall at the Covered Market. There is a FLOWER SELLER at the next stall who does not approve of MABEL. We may not see this person.

ESME and LIZZIE approach

LIZZIE: Have you eaten today, Mabel?

MABEL: Ain't sold enough to buy a stale bun.

LIZZIE hands MABEL a bread roll.

Who's this then? All of sweet 18.

ESME: 21. I'm twenty-one years old.

LIZZIE: Esme, this is Mabel. Mabel, this is Esme. Her father works for Dr Murray. Esme works for the Dictionary too.

MABEL holds out her hand, ESME hesitates then proffers her own, MABEL grabs it

MABEL: Lawks. No amount of by yer leave will fix that! (She looks at it carefully) Those fingers work? Can you feel this?

ESME: Yes. It feels a bit as if you are touching them through a glove. Like. Distanced.

MABEL: Right. Well. I'll bet they got stuck into you at school then, hey? Nothin' like a little flaw to bring out the uglies!

(beat) Well. Look around. See what you fancy.

There's not much. Eventually ESME picks up a wooden carving.

ESME: This is...Mabel... this carving is very good. This old wise face. He's so interesting. My Da would like this. You are a wood carver, you say?

MABEL: Eh well, nought else to do with my hands now no one wants 'em round their shaft.

ESME: 'Shaft'?

MABEL: (to LIZZIE) She stupid or something?

LIZZIE: No, Mabel, she just doesn't have an ear for your particular kind of language.

RACHEL BURKE, PHOTO: CLAUDIO RASCHELLA

What next?

Discuss the significance of the “lost words” as symbols of marginalised voices and hidden histories. How do these words mirror the experiences of certain groups in society?

Discuss the way in which storytelling, whether through words or actions, becomes a vehicle for change and social progress in the play?

KSENJA LOGOS, TILDA COBHAM-HERVEY, BRETT ARCHER AND JESS ARTHUR: PHOTO: CLAUDIO RASCHELLA.

INTERESTING READING

A Secret Feminist History of the Oxford English Dictionary

In 1901, the word bondmaid was found missing from the Oxford English Dictionary. By all accounts, bondmaid was the only word to be lost from the first edition. No one knows how, and that is enough for a story, but there are other reasons I wrote The Dictionary of Lost Words.

Words, for me, have always been acquaintances rather than friends—I recognize them most of the time, but can't always describe the detail of their features. I'm prone to mixing metaphors, and in my final year of school I had five marks taken off an exam for spelling my own name wrong. It's not rocket surgery, but I am a long way from mastering the English language, which is a shame, because it is the only language I speak.

The irony is, that despite my clumsy handling of words, I have always loved how writing them down in a particular way can create a rhythm, or conjure an image, or express an emotion. And I have refused to leave them be.

It was my dad who gave me my first dictionary. If I was going to use words, he said, I should use them properly. After that, whenever I asked how a word was spelled or what it meant, he would say, "look it up." But I found the dictionary to be an impenetrable thing. It played hide and seek with words I wanted to spell, and it could be arrogant and inflexible with the meanings it proposed. It was rarely on my side during Scrabble, and it often withheld the old, the rare and the ugly in an effort to be concise (and words, as with anything, are more interesting when they are old, rare or ugly).
So, while I continued to love words (and to butcher their spellings and mess with their meanings), I learned to dislike dictionaries.
Then a few years ago, a friend suggested I read The Professor and the Madman by Simon Winchester. It is a nonfiction account of the relationship between the editor of the Oxford English Dictionary, James Murray, and one of the more prolific (and notorious) volunteers, who sent in examples of how certain words had been used in literature. I thoroughly enjoyed it, but I was left with the impression that the most revered dictionary in the English Language was a particularly male endeavor. From what I could glean, all the editors were men, most of the assistants were men, most of the volunteers were men and most of the literature, manuals and newspaper articles used as evidence for how words were used, were written by men.

Where, I wondered, are the women in this story, and does it matter that they are absent?
It took me a while to find the women, and when I did, they were cast in minor and supporting roles. There was Ada Murray, who raised 11 children and ran a household at the same time as supporting her husband in his role as editor. There were Edith Thompson and her sister Elizabeth, who volunteered for the Oxford English Dictionary from the publication of the first words in 1884 to the publication of the last in 1928. There were Hilda, Elsie and Rosfrith Murray, who all worked in the Scriptorium

to support their father. And there were women whose poetry and prose were considered evidence for the meaning of one word or another. But in all cases, these women were outnumbered by their male counterparts, and history struggles to recall them.
I decided that the absence of women did matter, and that a lack of representation might mean that the first edition of the Oxford English Dictionary was biased in favor of the experiences and sensibilities of old, white, Victorian-era men.

In The Dictionary of Lost Words, I have told an alternative story about the English language, a story about women, that lives between the lines of the Oxford English Dictionary and lurks in the whitespace of history books. It is a story that has never been told, though fragments of it exist—they can be found in letters and newspaper clippings; in the slips containing words and sentences; in annotated proofs and old family photographs. I have searched for them in the archives of the Oxford University Press, and at the Oxfordshire History Centre, and they have gained substance as I walked through the streets of Oxford. I have collated information that others have overlooked, and I have interpreted its absence from the official history, but I have not tampered with the bones of that history. I have carefully woven my fiction through key historical events and people. I have not meddled with timelines and I have tried to render the personalities and motivations of real people as truthfully as a I can. I have not judged them—that is not my job.
As a writer, my job is to tell a story that reveals a truth. Fiction can often do this better than history (what we choose to report is never objective), but I don't think it is my place to change the general facts—if the first volume of the Oxford English Dictionary was published in 1888, I will make it so in my story; and if suffragettes were force-fed in Winsom Green prison, I will not suggest it happened elsewhere. My story, after all, might be the only historical account that many people read. But I will give these facts context. I will imagine what hasn't been reported to make the facts relevant to an alternative history where women are at the centre.

And so, I have put a girl called Esme under the sorting table of the Scriptorium, where all the words of the English language are being defined. I have made her steal that lost word, bondmaid, and then I've imagined the influence this word might have on her, and the influence she might have on other words—old, rare and ugly—as she grows into a woman.

Article by Pip Williams, published in Literary Hub, April 26, 2021.

Collection of Slang words

The Dictionary of Lost Words looks at the collection of words that are not deemed purposeful or have been classified as inappropriate. Since this time we have always had words that to not make it into an official 'Dictionary'.
There has been some form of 'slang' dictionary for hundreds of years. This continues today with the release of an 'urban' dictionary, collecting words that are unusual, only used geographically or that have youth slang appeal. Each year there are new inclusions, depending on the language that has been in increased circulation over that year.

Backstory of Pip Williams and The Dictionary of Lost Words.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2QUtyvnibAo

Tangent talk - Verity Laughton and Pip Williams

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_CwIUpmBI-I&t=34s

SCRIPT EXCERPTS

ACT 2, SCENE 4

LIZZIE: Some of them words ain't fit! They should be scrubbed from the earth!

ESME: You have more in common with Dr Murray, Lizzie, than you will ever know.

LIZZIE: But what's the point? Half the people who say those words will never be able to read any book, let alone a 'dictionary'!

ESME: Maybe not. But their words are as important, Lizzie, as any eminent man's ...literary construction... because the people who used them lived and died and struggled...like Mabel, like you, like me, too. It's like there's a plot to make us all invisible. The very least we can do is stake our claim!

ACT 2, Scene 6

GARETH looks at one of the slips.

GARETH: 'Pillock' (grins). Ah. Yes. I've heard that one. But not seen it in print!

ESME: No, I doubt if you will.

GARETH: 'The man's an utter pillock. No brains at all!' Tilda Taylor, 1910. Seems about right. Who is Tilda Taylor?

ESME: She's the woman who used the word.

GARETH: The words aren't in the Dictionary then?

ESME: No. None of them are.

GARETH: (shuffling through them) But some of them are quite common.

ESME: Among the people who use them, they are. But 'common' isn't a pre-requisite for the Dictionary. I see it as an editorial blind spot.

GARETH: Who uses them?

ESME: The poor. People who work at the Covered Market. Women. Which is why they've not been written down and why they've been excluded. Though sometimes they have been written down but they're still left out because they're not used in 'polite society'.

GARETH: Ah.

ESME: But they're important!

GARETH: Well, you'd better keep them safe, then.

ESME: Oh, I will. Don't worry. (beat) And then there are...

GARETH: Yes?

ESME: Well, there are also words that don't exist. I heard a woman called a 'scold' earlier today and I thought – what would they call a man who gave an angry speech? And what is the male equivalent of 'maiden' or 'whore'. Oh. You're probably shocked.

GARETH: I'm not shocked.

ESME: But it's interesting, isn't it? There are all these words in existence that are used to define women – maiden, wife, mother – that define women in a way that men are not.

GARETH: There are words like father, and husband. And bachelor. Just not 'maiden'. With that connotation of 'virgin'. Or. The other one. 'Whore'. About which I'm supposed to be shocked.

ESME: I do have a sense of humour.

GARETH: Phew!

ACT 2, SCENE 7
TILDA: Hello. You know each other?

ESME: Yes. Tilda. This is Gareth Owen. He's the lead compositor at the Press. Gareth, this is my friend Tilda –

GARETH: – Taylor. I have seen your name on a quotation, Miss Taylor.

TILDA: That sounds a bit familiar. But we'll let it pass. Esme, do you have some paper to hand to stop that bleeding?

ESME: As it happens...

GARETH: ...a quotation slip.

ESME: Here. Let me.

She tears the slip and applies it to GARETH's lip.

TILDA: Esme. I must go now. But I am meeting with some suffragists at The Eagle and Child this evening. Why don't you come? You can come too, Mr Owen, if you really are a man for this cause. Are you? Or are you here by happenstance?

GARETH: Not happenstance.

TILDA: No?

GARETH: No. My mother raised me alone. She had a hard life. Too hard. I go to these meetings for her.

TILDA: Well then. (beat) Esme. This is your cue now.

ESME: Oh. Yes. Uh. Gareth?

GARETH: Yes?

ESME: Perhaps...

GARETH: Yes?

TILDA: My God, this is torture.

ESME: We could go together.

GARETH: I'd like that.

TILDA: Hallelujah! I'll see you there at 7.00.

ACT 2, SCENE 11

ESME: It is the most beautiful gift of my life, Gareth Owen.

GARETH: It was this or a ring, Esme.

ESME: I repeat. The most beautiful.

GARETH: I love your fine mind. I love your quick thoughts. I love your ambition. I love your secrecy. I love your kindness. I love your determination. I love your fears and anxieties and your loyalty and precision. And I love your bewitching body and sweet face and riotous hair.

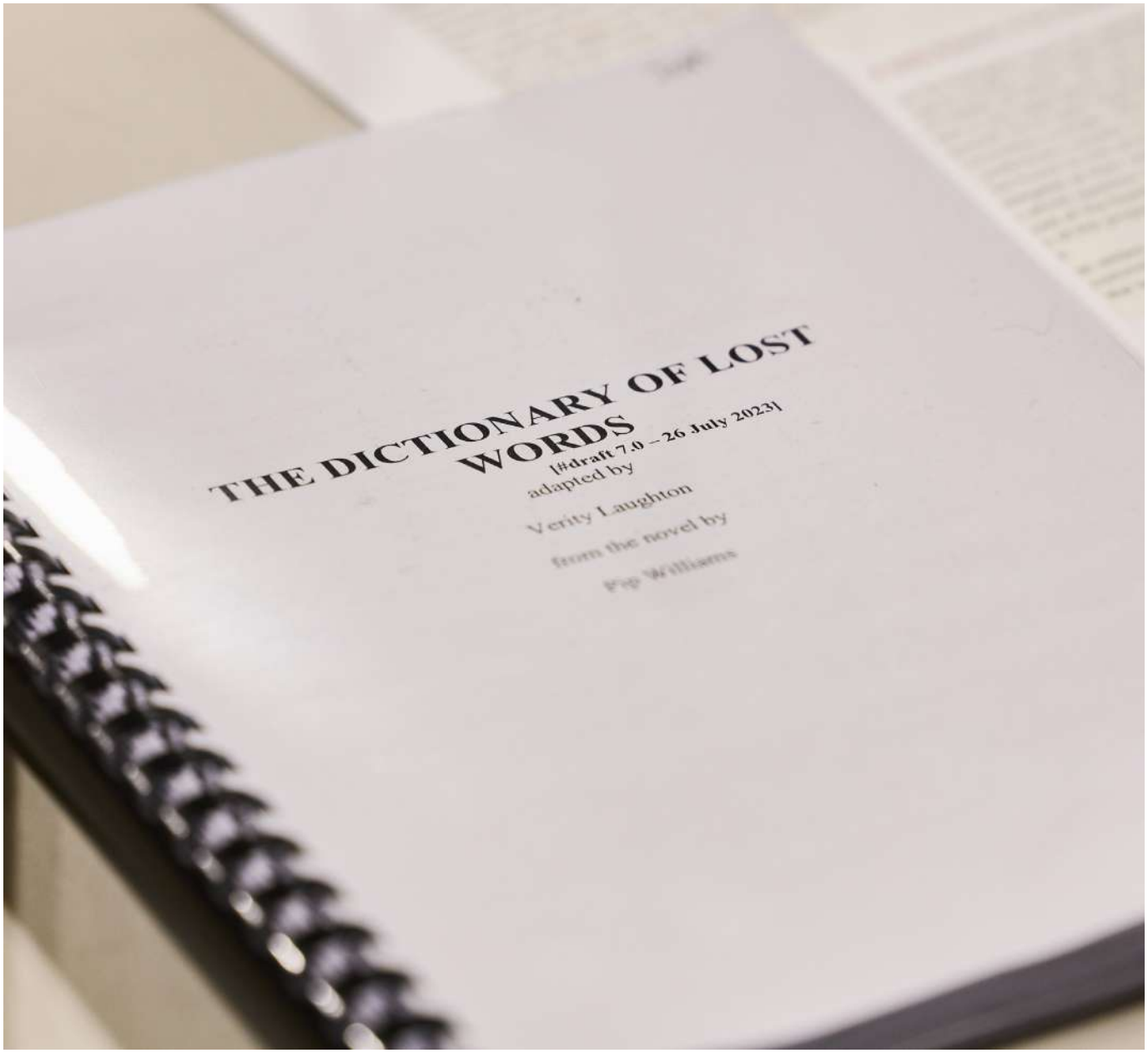
She kisses him.

ESME: I have a word.

She writes it on a slip. Gives it to him.

GARETH: 'Love'.

WORD SIGNAGE: LOVE



FURTHER ACTIVITIES

WRITTEN RESPONSE

Analysing the play using review writing techniques. These can be found on our website.
When reviewing a play be clear and concise, avoid re-enacting the play and instead look at choices and how the delivery of the play and creative choices did or did not work for you.

WRITTEN RESPONSE & ACTIVITY

In what ways does Esme's ability to adapt and learn from challenges, and the differing relationships, mirror the broader themes of social change depicted in the play?

Write scenes in which you have been challenged by social norms and how you have managed to adapt and grow. These can be monologues or two handers.

DISCUSSION

Explore instances in the play where language is used to reinforce gender biases or societal norms. How does this influence hcaracters perceptions of themselves and others?

ACTIVITY

Discuss the design of the set and how it contributed to the action and supported the writing. For a play set in this era are there other ways you could demonstrate the change in time over 100 years?

How could you recreate the settings and locations, without using a physical set? Could you use alternative means to move between time period?

STATE THEATRE
COMPANY SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Australian Government
Australia Council for the Arts
Government of South Australia
Arts South Australia