



JOHN MISTO'S *THE SHOE-HORN SONATA*

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1. The play's origins

'I do not have the power to build a memorial so I wrote a play instead.' John Misto

The Australian Government has yet to build a memorial to the forty-one Australian army nurses who suffered during World War II.

A few years before writing *The Shoe-Horn Sonata*, John Misto read Betty Jeffrey's book *White Coolies*. Betty had been a member of the Australian Army Nursing Service and she had survived captivity as a prisoner-of-war in Sumatra and Malaya, along with twenty-three of her colleagues. War is primarily a masculine domain and wartime stories tend to focus on men and masculine exploits. Betty's stories of the nurses' war experiences obsessed Misto. He carried out extensive research, including interviewing many Australian women who had endured and survived prisoner-of-war camps in South-East Asia. The play *The Shoe-Horn Sonata* pays tribute to these women who suffered from decisions made by the British, from the deeds of Japanese soldiers and from the inaction of successive Australian governments to acknowledge their contribution or situation.

This play poses questions about the way we construct and communicate our history. While it focuses on the stories of the two fictional women, one British and one Australian, who were evacuated from Singapore as the Empire disintegrated, it challenges us to look beyond the pain of the two women characters at the wider social and political context that has allowed this situation to pass unacknowledged.

2. Background to the play

In 1941 Singapore and Malaya were still under British control as part of the British Empire. Singapore had been considered 'an impregnable fortress', although the British had been warned since 1938 that the Japanese were planning a major invasion. The British had ignored the warning. By December 1941 the Japanese had invaded, and within seventy days, captured Singapore and Malaya. As the Japanese prepared to take Singapore, the British Government refused to evacuate British nationals, arguing that it would be 'bad for morale'. Empty ships were allowed to leave Singapore Harbour and thus when the Japanese bombed the island, thousands of people died.

On 13 February 1942 the British Government finally conceded to the evacuation of civilians. Thirty-three ships heavily overloaded with thousands of women and children immediately ran into fierce Japanese naval bombardment and in a single night huge numbers of these refugee women and children were slaughtered. Those who managed to survive were taken prisoner.

According to Australian army regulations nurses are not permitted at the front line; however Australian nurses found themselves right in the path of the Japanese invasions nursing the young Australian boys who had enlisted to carry out their patriotic duty. Australian nurses kept hospitals running in the middle of the battlefields.

The two on-stage characters in *The Shoe-Horn Sonata* are a British civilian and Australian Army nurse, both evacuated from Singapore.

The memories of past action that are recalled by these two characters focus on their experiences during the evacuation from Singapore and their incarceration as prisoners-of-war.

3. Synopsis of the play

The play is a two-acter and is effectively also a two-hander. The audience does hear the voice of the third character—Rick, the television interviewer—but he is never seen on stage. A number of off-stage characters are also referred to throughout the play and the images of historical 'characters' are projected during the performance establishing the wider world of the play.

The main action of the play is set in 1995, but we are also projected back in time to the events of the fall of Singapore and the subsequent 'rescue' by the Japanese and incarceration in prisoner-of-war camps. The scenes in the present take place in a TV studio, in the motel/hotel rooms in which they are staying during the filming of the documentary about their wartime experiences and in a neutral space somewhere within the studio. Importantly the scenes also take us to various 'real' places during the war, including Singapore and Belalau via the projected visual and sound images.

At one level this is the story about the meeting of two female POW survivors, Bridie Cartwright and Sheila Richards, for the first time since the end of the war fifty years previously. The two women had been evacuated from Singapore and had endured together the pain and suffering of war. The play focuses on the re-establishment of their relationship. We observe not only their reunion but their reconciliation.

Their story is told in a complex theatrical form that alerts the audience to the fact that this is not a simple narrative. The story unravels as the truths and untruths of the past are revealed. While on the one hand the focus is on the personal truths and lies, these are seen to be part of a much bigger issue: the construction of public accounts of past events. We see the way in which such public accounts obfuscate and conceal, and we see the effects of such obfuscation on individuals—'keep smiling'.

Act One: Scene One

The play begins in darkness and silence. The voice of Bridie comes out of this empty space. Bridie is explaining the 'kowtow' although it is not immediately clear who her audience is. This has the effect of engaging the theatre audience in her story. We hear a male voice questioning her and once the 'on air' sign becomes visible we become aware that we are in a TV studio, although we never actually see the male interviewer. Bridie answers the questions put to her with a sense of candour that seems to take the interviewer almost by surprise. She tells of her enlistment and the evacuation of Singapore. The shoe-horn is introduced although at this stage we do not see it or yet understand its significance. Her story is punctuated by the song, 'Fall in Brother', and the slide projections of posters and photographs of women enlisting. The glass of water on the table beside her evokes a sense of minimal survival. The scene ends in a moment of darkness with the reverberating sound of 'Rule Britannia' and the projection of slides of prosperous Singapore before the fall, signifying the last bastion of the British Empire. Note the playwright's comment on the last slide that projects the words, 'Don't listen to rumour': 'If only they had ...'

Student activities

1. Make notes on the factual information Bridie reveals about the war.
2. Make a list of words to describe first impressions of this character and include quotations from the script to support them.
3. Make notes on the ideas or issues that are highlighted in the dramatic form of this scene.

Scene Two

The lighting stage change reveals a scene shift to a motel room in Melbourne. Bridie now enters with Sheila who has just arrived. Sheila is carrying a pair of gloves and from this and her attitude to the porter we are made aware of her British origins. The playwright indicates that there is tension between the two women. Part of the puzzle for the audience is in establishing whether this tension is something that exists in the present, or whether its origins go back

into the past. Their dialogue reveals a sense of ambivalence in their reunion and we learn that it is fifty years since they have seen each other. We become aware of the existence of Myra, one of the off-stage characters. As they manoeuvre around each other and their questions and accusations, they move to a point where their shared past experience brings them to co-operate in the lifting of the suitcase in the rhythm of Japanese counting. The playwright notes that this dramatic action is to sound 'almost like a war cry' and is followed by a 'blackout'.

Student activities

4. Have students make notes on the factual information that the two characters reveal about the war.
5. Have students make a list of words to describe the relationship between these two women in the present. Encourage them to consider whether the relationship might have been different in the past.
6. Have students make notes on the ideas or issues that are highlighted in the dramatic form of this scene.

Scene Three

This scene opens with the nostalgic sound of a 1940s song—'Something to Remember You By'—which is to take on an almost ironic meaning as the play continues and which we eventually connect with the shoe-horn. Sheila's nervousness in the television interview situation allows Bridie to assume the more powerful stance, and we assume that this is the role that she played in the relationship in earlier times. The voice of the interviewer continues with questions about the evacuation of Singapore and Sheila's upper-class British origins are confirmed. As Sheila recounts these events from her perspective, we see slides projected depicting the reality of the situation and hear Bridie's verbal and non-verbal interjections which indicate not only her attitude to the situation but also to her memory and construction of the events. As the interviewer probes Sheila's feelings we hear and see the reality of the situation that she is describing. We hear waves and the sound of young Sheila singing 'Jerusalem', and images of the bombing and destruction of Singapore. The unfolding of

the memories takes on its own rhythm as the two women in dialogue tell the story of their time in the water before the approach of the Japanese ship. The shoe-horn which has been introduced in the opening scene begins to take on new meanings as Bridie describes how she used it to keep Sheila conscious during this ordeal. We also learn that the shoe-horn was 'lost' during the war. The arrival of the Japanese is graphically presented to the audience with the sound of the waves, the singing of 'Jerusalem' and the illumination of the Japanese flag. It is at this point that the two are joined by their memories with the linking of hands on stage as the Japanese voices are heard. The scene ends with a crescendo as the singing continues under the images of the Japanese invasion of Singapore and the fall of Empire is complete.

Student activities

7. Make notes on the factual information that is revealed about the events of the war and the fall of Singapore.
8. Make a list of lines which reveal the tensions in the relationship between the two women at this point. Discuss why this tension exists.
9. Make notes on the ideas or issues that are highlighted by the dramatic form of this scene.

Scene Four

This scene occurs in the motel room after the previous interview scene. As the two characters review the interview we see their different responses to the process of dredging up these memories. Some of these responses reveal class and cultural differences as we see from their dialogue. The tensions that we witnessed in an earlier scene are still evident and the reasons for them are still not clear. As they reflect on the interview their conversation turns to their memories and this time they relive a moment of comic delight as they replay the sticking of the pin in Lipstick Larry's loin-cloth. This incident is played out as a play within a play as they are both recalling the past and enacting how they will talk about it to the camera, then enacting it as if a camera were there to capture their performance. This scene then concertinas into one image as the sounds of Lipstick Larry punctuate

their performance. There is a blackness in this performance—the beating of the young Bridie and Sheila's attempt to save her from it—and there is a premonition of something more deep and powerful that is later to be revealed. The replayed moment then brings the audience back into the present and there is a moment of reality as they stand now at a distance from the sound of Lipstick Larry beating Bridie. The scene ends with the sounds continuing as the two women in the present clink glasses—a dramatic action that signals their reunion.

Student activities

10. Make notes on the factual information that is revealed about the war.
11. Explore the views that each character has disclosed in the process of recounting these past events in their lives. Identify lines that reveal these attitudes.
12. Make notes on the ideas or issues that are highlighted by the dramatic form of this scene.

Scene Five

This scene takes us back into the studio and we are once again in the middle of an interview. The focus of this phase of the interview is on the sinking of the *Vyner Brooke* and the incarceration in the prisoner-of-war camp. The scene begins with the ironic sound of 'Happy Times', juxtaposed with the sound of 'machine-gun fire' and 'the cries of women'. Behind the words of Bridie and Sheila are photographs of women in the camps and a Japanese soldier. This scene reveals more of the tensions between the two women as each reconstructs her own memory of their shared ordeal. This ordeal included being 'available' for Japanese soldiers. Bridie recounts the situation of 'Lavender Street'—and how the women who had been set up tricked the Japanese by supposedly coughing up blood, simulating tuberculosis. We learn of the ever-present hunger of the prisoners as the two women recount the story of the bone in the context of the contempt in which the Japanese soldiers held women. It is at this point when Bridie produces the 'concrete evidence' in the form of the chop bone, that we begin to realise the difficulty that the interviewer is experiencing in articulating the questions

that he wants to ask, and we come to see how well the women have dealt with the horrors of their incarceration. We are also once again faced with notions of reality, truth, memory and reconstructions of the past. The scene moves to another moment of reconciliation between the women as the shoe-horn once again features, this time as a metronome, and we hear of the singing that sustained the women in the camp. This information is underscored by the playing of 'Bolero' which builds to a climax, with Bridie conducting, as the scene ends.

Student activities

13. Make notes on the factual information that is revealed about the war.
14. Examine the questions that the interviewer asks and note the ways in which the two women answer them.
15. Make notes on the ideas or issues that are highlighted by the dramatic form of this scene.

Scene Six

This scene opens in the empty hotel room. The women's entrance in the conga line dance suggests their growing reconciliation, but as the dialogue continues we are aware that there are still tensions between them. As they delve into their memories we become aware that the enemies were not only the Japanese—but also the British and Australian authorities. Although the scene begins with the joyous image of dancing, the tension level builds throughout. The 'discovery' of the snapshots is juxtaposed with the images that we have seen on the screen. The big picture is now refocussed for the audience as Bridie surveys the photos. The tension continues to increase. The production of the tobacco tin by Bridie seems like another attempt at reconciliation—but it is obvious to the audience that this tin is also a further source of tension, despite the expressions of fondness that Bridie expresses for Sheila. As Bridie departs, Sheila is left alone on the stage and she takes out the shoe-horn from a drawer. This is the first time the audience sees it and it takes on a symbolic significance that is to grow throughout the play. There is a moment of flashback to the young Sheila and Japanese soldiers and a song.

The image of Sheila staring at the shoe-horn passes and is replaced by projected images of war-ravaged women staring at the camera.

Student activities

16. Make notes on the factual information that is revealed about the war.
17. Examine the relationship between the two women as it is revealed in their actions and their dialogue.
18. Make notes on the ideas or issues that are highlighted by the dramatic form of this scene.

Scene Seven

This scene is again in the interview. It begins with images of emaciated women POWs. The scene is essentially a monologue punctuated by questions from the interviewer. We learn about Bridie's experience of the war camp, and it is important for what we are later to learn about Sheila that we see Bridie apparently strong and dealing with the situation. The image of sharing the caramel, the story of the Christmas carol—ironically presented with the singing of 'O Come All ye Faithful' and 'God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen'—and the meeting with the man that Bridie was later to marry, presented against the song 'We'll Meet Again', highlight issues about camaraderie and loyalty set against the horrors of war.

Student activities

19. Make notes on the factual information that is revealed about the war.
20. Examine the language of Bridie's monologue and how this reveals her attitude to the events that she is recalling and describing.
21. Make notes on the ideas or issues that are highlighted by the dramatic form of this scene.

Scene Eight

This scene opens with the drinking of a glass of fizzing water—a neat juxtaposition with the earlier image of the glass of water and the images of hunger and thirst in the camps. We learn that Sheila has missed an interview session because of her 'hangover'. The dialogue in this scene is also about past events—and more recent events.

Sheila questions Bridie about what she has said in the missed taping session and also seeks to have Bridie recount the events of the previous night which are something of a blur in her memory. This scene shows Bridie in a mothering role—a situation that is to be reversed before the play ends.

Underpinning the interaction in this scene is an attempt by Bridie to understand why Sheila had rejected her after they had been rescued from the camp at the end of the war. Finally Sheila takes out the shoe-horn and throws it onto the bed. Bridie sees her initials on it and begins to question Sheila as to how she had come by it. There is now real tension between the two with Bridie no longer in the position of control. Sheila recalls Belarau and retells the events which Bridie was too sick to know about—including Sheila's sacrifice for her. This revelation is underscored by the noise of crickets which cut out as Bridie is faced with the truth. The scene ends with a dramatic representation of the isolation of the two characters in the spotlights and the voice-over flashback to the moment when Sheila returned from the Japanese with the tablets for Bridie. The final moment on stage has Bridie turning to face Sheila, the slow fading of lights and the song, 'After the Ball is Over'.

Student activities

22. Make notes on the factual information that is revealed about the war.
23. Make notes on the events of the previous night and try to account for this behaviour.
24. Make a list of words to describe impressions of the relationship between the two women at this point in the play.
25. Make notes on the ideas or issues that are highlighted by the dramatic form of this scene.
26. Discuss how the audience might respond to an interval at this point.

Act Two: Scene Nine

The scene opens in the studio and dominating the space is a large image of both Australian and British women bowing to the Japanese. This huge image remains throughout most of the scene and the audience cannot escape its meaning. Both

Bridie and Sheila are present and Bridie is off to one side singing the Captive's 'Hymn' (with the women's choir). Sheila is speaking to the camera and her answers to the questions are juxtaposed with Bridie's singing. In this interview we learn about the situation in Belalau and the Japanese order that had been issued to kill every prisoner of war.

Bridie's illness and the way in which Sheila looked after her is made public—but Sheila balks at telling the whole truth about how she acquired the drugs to save her, making up the story of the shoe-horn saving her. This information is picked up by the interviewer as if it is highly significant. The scene ends with the story of Curtin's message: 'Keep smiling, girls'. The horror of this command is emphasised by the image of Curtin and the prisoners and the Judy Garland song.

Student activities

27. Make notes on the factual information that is revealed about the war.
28. Make notes on the way that Sheila has responded to the events of the war. Examine the ways in which she uses language in this scene to both reveal and hide her feelings.
29. Make notes on the ideas or issues that are highlighted by the dramatic form of this scene.

Scene Ten

The transition to this scene holds the image of emaciated male prisoners in view as we move into a space that is neither hotel room nor studio although both characters are still wearing body microphones. Sheila has not gone to lunch and is sitting doing some kind of tapestry—an image of stitching things together. Bridie comments on the photograph of the soldiers—a comment that stimulates a riposte from Sheila about the role of the government in suppressing information about the women's role in the war. This interaction between the on-stage action and the projected visual images connects past and present.

Their conversation reveals the tension that is now out in the open. Recriminations flow as Bridie tries to make sense of what she has learned and Sheila tries to defend her actions, not only with the Japanese but also in leaving Bridie after the war. The intercutting of Rick's voice into their

altercation leaves them not knowing how much he has heard. The juxtaposition of the song 'I'll Walk Alone' suggests the isolation of each of these victims of this dreadful situation.

Student activities

30. Make notes on the factual information that is revealed about the war.
31. Make notes on their view of the relationship between the women in this scene. Consider what might be causing the tensions that are evident in the scene.
32. Make notes on the ideas or issues that are highlighted by the dramatic form of this scene.

Scene Eleven

This scene is back in the studio and the visual image of the postcards seems dwarfed beside the projected images that we have previously seen. The recitation of the words of each of the postcards leads the women back into their memories. The moments of darkness highlight the pain of these experiences.

In this scene the image of the sonata becomes significant as the women trawl back through their memories together. In this scene, one of the most important issues of the play is highlighted—the complete lack of acknowledgement by the Australian government juxtaposed with the pitifully small amount of compensation paid by the Japanese government to these victims of the power play of these sovereign states.

Student activities

33. Make notes on the factual information that is revealed about the war.
34. Discuss the feelings that the women reveal about their memories in this scene.
35. Make notes on the ideas or issues that are highlighted by the dramatic form of this scene.

Scene Twelve

This scene takes place in the motel room. Bridie is attempting to re-establish their relationship despite the obvious tensions between them. It is in this scene that we learn of Bridie's 'crime' in the David Jones' food hall. We now understand how she feels and why she reacted in this way.

Sheila's reaction to this confession allows us to see how deeply scarred these women have been by their experiences—not only by the Japanese, but also by the responses and inaction of their own countries. Sheila's realisation is that it is important not only for themselves but for the thousands of others similarly afflicted to tell these stories in public. Bridie is not yet convinced and the tension between them arises again. We are now aware that this tension is about the present, the past, memories, recollections, reconstructions, truth, shame and guilt. The moment of darkness returns, followed by images of 'great men' of history and the song, 'Whispering Grass'.

Student activities

36. Make notes on the factual information that is revealed about the war.
37. Make notes on the ideas about truth and lies that are revealed in this scene.
38. Make notes on the ideas or issues that are highlighted by the dramatic form of this scene.

Scene Thirteen

This scene cuts straight into the interview as both Bridie and Sheila recount their experiences as the war draws to an end. We hear about the diaries and the burning of these by the British. This is overlaid with images of Hiroshima and the news of the death of Pearl after the war had officially ended. There is a sense of calm as both women recount these events, although at one significant moment Sheila's composure cracks. It is at this point that we see the symbiotic relationship that the women had previously enjoyed. As Bridie finishes recounting the anecdote that Sheila had begun they join hands and relive, together, that moment of memory and reconciliation. The playing of the 'Blue Danube Waltz' is a counterpoint to their memories. Dancing becomes associated with life and joy and hope and survival, and this is juxtaposed with the Japanese atrocities in Belalau and the visual images of the celebrations of the end of the war.

The scene reaches a climax as the confessions of the two women are made public. This is the moment of truth as Bridie tells about Sheila's personal sacrifice and Sheila tells of Bridie's

theft from David Jones. The simplicity of these truths juxtaposed with the official 'lies' of the government ring out with a clarity and candour that is underlined by the gradual darkness that follows the revelation. This scene ends with the sounds of the hymn 'An Epitaph to War', images of the women recuperating and the huge projected image of the army nurses arriving in Singapore.

Student activities

39. Make notes on the factual information that is revealed about the war.
40. Examine the relationship between the characters that is revealed in this scene.
41. Make notes on the ideas or issues that are highlighted by the dramatic form of this scene.

Scene Fourteen

The filming has finished, and Bridie is reading a newspaper—a poignant symbol of the official version of news. The two colleagues and friends are now reunited and this is contained in the image of the lifting of the suitcase. While most of the tension has been released there is still some unresolved business to be dealt with. Sheila holds out the shoe-horn, now the symbol not only of their reunion, but also of their reconciliation. The two women embrace. The play ends with them women dancing to the 'Blue Danube' and in the slowly darkening space the final spotlight falls on the shoe-horn.

Student activities

42. Make notes on the factual information that is revealed about the war.
43. Discuss the reconciliation that has taken place between the characters.
44. Make notes on the ideas or issues that are highlighted by the dramatic form of this scene.

4. Concerns or themes of the play

This is a complex play that layers issue over issue in a dramatically intricate pattern. It is important that students are able to visualise the action that is occurring on the stage. This includes not only

the action between the two characters and the interactions between the two characters and the interviewer, but also the 'actions' of the projected visual and auditory images. The play only exists in this complete picture and it is from this complete picture that the issues, concerns or themes are derived.

History and historiography

While the focus of the play appears to be on the two individual characters, it is through their story that we discover an even bigger story—the ways in which official sources construct histories so that truth becomes a central casualty. In one sense the play is about historiography or the writing of history. This is evident in various aspects of the play including the juxtaposition of the 'factual' information in the slides and the fictional characters. But it also operates within the stories of the characters themselves moving within the stage space. The hesitation of the women to tell their stories publicly has helped to skew the writing of the history. But we come to understand the ways in which the women have effectively colluded with Japanese, British and Australian officialdom by keeping their own counsel.

It is interesting that now, fifty years after the war, they are telling their stories in an oral medium because, unlike other official war stories, they have not been recorded in writing. It is also significant that in the telling of these stories it is the male interviewer who is seeking the information for another public medium of recording history—one that is as potentially selective as the official government records can be. In both cases it is the stories that are not told—'the negative information'—that leads to a skewed and untruthful account of events. This is a play about the stories that are not told for various reasons.

Student activities

45. Work through the play to identify those aspects of the dramatic and theatrical action which are concerned with the notion of historiography.

46. Make notes on the ideas in the play associated with the writing of history and identify the dramatic and theatrical aspects which expose these ideas.
47. Write an essay in response to one of the following topics:
 - a. 'History is what happened after it's been cleaned up and made palatable.' Doris Lessing
How does this play explore this idea?
 - b. 'History shows that it's the killing that is valued and the saving that isn't.'
Does this play support this statement?

Truth, honesty, candour

Truth is central to the ideas of this play. The idea of truth, telling the truth and recognising the truth is not located only in the interrelationship between the two women. Certainly, we come to understand that there has been a concealing of truth between them during their time in the camp and after their release. This concealment is aided by Sheila's geographical isolation. For Bridie, telling the truth has arisen as an issue in relation to the theft from the David Jones food hall.

Telling the truth is also shown to be an issue in their interactions in the present; but honesty—or more significantly—lack of it, is also shown to be part of the *modus operandi* of the British, Australian and Japanese. Official concealments have their official spin, but they are concealments, nevertheless. Perhaps in the final analysis, this play demonstrates that such concealments cannot be contained forever. Truth will out.

Student activities

48. Explore those aspects of the play which deal with the notion of honesty or truth.
49. Identify the dramatic and theatrical aspects which expose these ideas.
50. Write an essay on the following topic:
Bridie: Do you want me to tell the truth?
How important is telling the truth for the two characters in this play?

The fall of empire

The play is ultimately about the fall of two empires: the British and the Japanese. The notion of empire is associated with patriarchy

and a certain lifestyle that favours the rich and privileged. Empire confers on men power and status and deprives women and children of it. This play demonstrates the atrocious extent to which such power can be used against the disenfranchised. It also demonstrates the ways in which those with such power can use and abuse it and the lengths to which they will go in order to ensure they maintain their power.

Singapore, in one sense, was the last bastion of the British empire and the fall of Singapore to the Japanese occurred in particularly extraordinary circumstances which demonstrate the ethnocentrism of the British and their reluctance to give up their power. This is symbolised in the character of Sheila's mother. The fall of the Japanese empire effectively came as the allied powers won the war and the play reveals the difficulty that the Japanese soldiers in the camps experienced in relinquishing their power.

Student activities

51. Explore images of empire in the play.
52. Collect quotations from the play to illustrate these images. Remember to include quotes from the stage directions as well as from the dialogue.
53. Identify the dramatic and theatrical aspects which expose these ideas.
54. Write an essay on the following topic: 'When empires fall they crush those without power and status.' To what extent is this true for the characters in this play?

Power relationships

This play explores power relationships at a number of levels. The most obvious power play on stage occurs between the interviewer and the women that he is interviewing. This power play has an ambiguous moment in which the women are uncertain as to whether Rick has overheard a 'private' conversation.

There is also a shifting power play between the two women themselves that is a reflection of shifts in the power relationships that had been in play between them during the war. These shifts are also set against the power relationships between the British authorities and British nationals in Singapore, Australian authorities and

the nurses and, of course between the Japanese captors and the prisoners-of-war.

Student activities

55. Explore those aspects of the play which deal with power relationships.
56. Identify the dramatic and theatrical aspects which expose these ideas.
57. Make a list of quotations from the stage directions and dialogue which illustrate these ideas.
58. Write an essay on the following topic: 'This is a play that demonstrates how power-relationships are never static but always changing.' Is this your view of the play?

Heroism

The play revolves around the heroic deeds of the women during the war. These deeds were acts of physical courage of the highest order. For Sheila, the supreme sacrifice of selling her body to the Japanese in order to obtain the necessary drugs for her friend's survival is all the more poignant as we understand the cultural and social background that she had come from. But these are not the only deeds of heroism.

As the stories unfurl we encounter the heroic spirit not only of these two women, but of others who were in the same situation. We come to understand heroism not only as a masculine characteristic, and not merely associated with great physical feats. Sheila's greatest heroic act is to give her body to the Japanese soldiers in order to save the life of her friend.

Student activities

59. Explore those aspects of the play which demonstrate heroism.
60. Make a list of quotations from the play that illustrate heroism. Be sure to collect quotations from the stage directions as well as from the dialogue.
61. Identify the dramatic and theatrical moments in which these ideas are highlighted.
62. Write an essay on the following topic: 'This is a play about women who did the right thing for their country and carried out heroic acts for each other.' To what extent is this a main concern of this play?

Memories, dealing with pain, reconciliation

A key focus of this play is on the reconciliation that eventually occurs between the two women. This reconciliation is not easily come by and indeed at some points throughout the play it seems doubtful whether it is possible at all. The reunion of the two means that layers of memories must be recalled, relived and reconstructed so that understanding and acceptance can come into play. This is a painful process but both characters come to understand that running away from pain is only one way of dealing with it and there is something satisfying for them in dealing with it in a more open way now that they are together again.

For each character we see that there is both a personal reconciliation with painful memories as well as a reconciliation with each other. The reconciliation of their friendship can only occur when the personal reconciliation has been achieved. What is obvious at the end of the play is that there has yet to be a public reconciliation for these women with the wider world which is still to acknowledge them.

Student activities

63. Explore those aspects of the play which deal with memories and reconciliation.
64. Identify the dramatic and theatrical aspects which expose these ideas.
65. Write an essay on the following topic: 'Would you care to join me in ... celebrating peace?' To what extent have the two women achieved peace by the end of the play?

War and atrocities

The play highlights the horrors of war particularly for women and civilians. The atrocious way in which human beings treat fellow human beings in a wartime situation is not restricted to the Japanese, but seen to be central to war itself. The atrocities are seen to have affected both women's lives ever after.

What is particularly significant for these women is the requirement to 'keep smiling' and to repress the memories. For these women the memories of the atrocities are tinged with guilt and shame. In some respects this amounts to an

even worse atrocity which plagues the lives of these women after the war.

But there were also some positive effects of the war for these women. The closeness of their relationships and the ways in which they supported each other demonstrates a friendship that does, in fact, stand the test of time. The recounting of the wartime incidents demonstrates the courage, the loyalty and the determination of these women.

Student activities

66. Work through the play to identify those aspects of the dramatic and theatrical action which are concerned with war and its atrocities.
67. Make notes on the ideas in the play associated with war and identify the dramatic and theatrical aspects which expose these ideas.
68. Write an essay in response to one of the following topics:
 - a. *The Shoe-Horn Sonata* shows us that it is possible to come to terms with the harmful effects of wartime atrocities;
 - b. To what extent do the characters come to terms with the effects of their experiences?

5. Dramatic form and theatrical structure

The play is a complex non-naturalistic piece that works particularly well in a small theatre space. It uses techniques that are reminiscent of Brecht's notion of 'epic theatre'. The episodic structure with slides, sounds, music, specific lighting effects and symbols point out the larger issues for the audience and reader. These are essential aspects of the text—not simply directorial or design elements associated with a particular production. It is important that students understand that these aspects are *not* addenda to the main action but essential components of it. The dramatic and theatrical 'devices' communicate the play's meanings.

Projected images

There are many images projected throughout the action on the stage. These images also include words projected onto the screen. The images juxtapose the fictional and the real so as to heighten the audience's understanding of the enormity of the issues.

Student activities

69. Read through the play and make a list of the projected images required by the script. For each image, note what is occurring on stage while the image is projected.
70. Identify the main ideas communicated through the projected images juxtaposed with the dramatic action.
71. Collect a set of quotations from the stage directions that support these ideas or issues.

Music

Music is essential to the action. The words of songs and the particular musical items highlight the notion of the 'sonata'. The placement of particular items of music serve to link the actions of the present, the memories of the past, the reality of the past and the officially sanctioned versions of the past.

Student activities

72. Read through the play and make a list of the music required by the script. For each item of music, note what dramatic action is occurring on stage and any slides that are projected onto the screen during the music.
73. Examine the words of the songs that are sung in the play. Identify how these highlight the key issues of the play.
74. Identify the concerns of the play that are communicated through the music.

Sounds

The sounds are particularly important in establishing the mood and the meanings of the play. There is a range of sounds that establish the reality of the past—the singing of the crickets or the lapping of the waves. The *deus ex machina* effect of these amplified sounds further highlights the issues of memories and

reconstructions of past realities. There are also significant moments of silence.

Student activities

75. Read through the play and make a list of the sounds required by the script. Note moments of silence. For each sound (or moment of silence) note what is occurring on stage while the sound is audible.
76. Identify the mood associated with each sound and the effect on the mood when the sound cuts out.
77. Identify the main ideas communicated through the sounds juxtaposed with the dramatic action.

Lighting spots and darkness

Lighting is commonly designed for a particular theatrical production. In *The Shoe-Horn Sonata*, Misto has designed particular uses of lighting and darkness as essential to his script. These are, therefore, essential components of the playwright's meaning, rather than aspects of the director's or designer's interpretation of the script.

Student activities

78. Read through the play and make a list of moments when the playwright requires a lighting spot on a person or object.
79. Identify the main ideas associated with this use of lighting.
80. Read through the play and make a list of moments when the playwright requires darkness.
81. Identify the main ideas associated with the use of darkness.

Symbols

A symbol is an image which contains a meaning of greater significance than its concrete manifestation. A symbol may be an object, an action, a sound or projected image. In this play there are several images that take on symbolic significance. The most important symbolic object is the shoe-horn. The significance of this object which is used to help put on boots grows as the play develops. There are other symbols in the play,

including the kowtow, the song 'Jerusalem' and the Japanese counting.

Student activities

82. Identify moments in the play when the symbol of the shoe-horn is highlighted. Trace the developing patterns of ideas associated with the shoe-horn as the play progresses.
83. Identify other symbols in the play such as the kowtow and the sonata, and identify the ideas associated with these symbols in terms of the play as a whole.

Humour

This play exposes an atrocious situation—not only of the war and its effects on the women who were caught up in it—but also of the ways in which the truth about such atrocities is hidden from public view. Yet it is a very funny play. The humour derives not only from the way in which the women used the power of the human spirit to laugh at adversity, but also from the way in which the playwright has juxtaposed those moments of recounting of comic events with the horrors of the memories of the reality. The light and dark in this play allows us to be both horrified and entertained. As in any great tragedy, the comic allows not simply relief from the pain, but helps us to question the reasons for the horror.

Student activities

84. Read through the play and identify moments where there is humour. This may be in action or dialogue.
85. Discuss the effects of the humour at each point.
86. Identify how the humour highlights the key issues.

6. Characters

The characters in this play include not only the onstage characters of Bridie and Sheila. The voice of Rick the interviewer establishes the main off-stage character, but there are also other off-stage characters in the present and the remembered past. Juxtaposed with these fictional characters are the real people whose image appear on the screens.

Bridie

The Bridie that we see on stage is in her early 70s. As she recounts the events of the war and interacts with Sheila we learn about her life before the war, her reasons for enlisting and her ways of coping with the war experiences at the time and since the war ended. What strikes us most about her recollections of the painful events of the war is the apparently emotion-free way in which she recounts them. Bridie is a complex character who has constructed her own moral stance to deal with the aftershocks of these shocking experiences. The interest for the audience is not only in the ways in which she deals with her painful memories but also in how she deals with the confrontation with the truths about the past in the present.

We come to know Bridie not only in the present but also as she recalls and relives past memories. Bridie's first moment on stage shows her demonstrating the action of the kowtow—a gesture that in some ways highlights an important aspect of her personality. We see her answering Rick's questions, in dialogue with Sheila, re-enacting past moments and we hear her younger voice in flashback. All that we see about Bridie is also juxtaposed with the 'reality' of the situation as depicted in the projected visual and sound images.

Student activities

87. Examine the various ways in which aspects of Bridie's character is revealed.
88. Make a list of key lines which Bridie speaks in the present that indicate her viewpoint on the war.
89. Identify moments of dramatic action that indicate aspects of Bridie's character.
90. Make a list of quotations that illustrate salient features of Bridie's character.

Sheila

Sheila, although resident in Australia since the war, is basically British. We first see her entering the motel room and she is distinguished by the gloves that she carries. Unlike Bridie she is still single. As the play unfolds we learn about her life as a girl in Singapore before the invasion, her evacuation as the Japanese invade and the

terrible existence that she endured as a young prisoner-of-war. We are also aware from her initial responses that the experiences have made their mark upon the girl who is now a middle-aged woman.

As the play proceeds, we become aware that Sheila's relationship with Bridie all those years ago cannot be replicated in the present. We watch as Sheila gradually reaches the point where candour is possible and the relationship between the two women can be reconstructed. We meet Sheila through her monologues, her interactions with Bridie, her answering of Rick's questions, her enactment of earlier events and through the voiceover flashbacks to wartime incidents.

Student activities

91. Examine the various ways in which aspects of Sheila's character are revealed.
92. Make a list of key lines which Sheila speaks in the present that indicate her viewpoint on the war.
93. Compare these lines with lines in the flashbacks involving the younger Sheila.
94. Identify moments of dramatic action that indicate aspects of Sheila's character.

The relationship between Bridie and Sheila

In one sense this play is about the relationship between these two characters. It demonstrates how two human beings can support each other through the most horrendous events—the horrors of war. It also explores how such events can erode inner peace. They had once shared food, literally taking it out of one mouth and putting it in the other. They had dragged each other to safety. They had crawled on the ground digging graves. They had once been prepared to die together. Both characters are troubled, guilt-ridden and traumatised by what they have endured.

But the play is not simply the celebration of a reunion of two people who have been separated by the passage of time. It is about reconciliation—the restoring of a relationship which had nurtured them both through the horrors. Yet the reunion is not without tension

and the play exposes, *inter alia*, one key reason for this tension: honesty—or the lack thereof. It is only now, years after the event, that the 'truth' is able to be revealed and a reconciliation is possible.

John Misto has said that this story is about an 'unknown holocaust'. An important aspect of the holocaust is the difficulty of presenting the reality—the truth. Atrocities are hidden, and evidence obliterated. As the play draws to its close we realise not only the extent of what the women themselves have kept hidden, but more importantly, that their silence is part of a much larger conspiracy to keep the reality of these events from public notice. It is a masterful stroke to present these stories within the framework of investigative journalism—the interview situation.

Student activities

95. Explore the relationship between the two characters in the past from the events that they recall, recount and re-enact.
96. Explore the relationship between the two characters in the present up to the moment in which Sheila is about to admit her sexual encounter with the Japanese soldier. Explore not only the dialogue but the character's actions to identify what is happening between these two characters.
97. Explore the course of the relationship from the moment of Sheila's revelation to the final dance at the end. Explore not only the dialogue but the character's actions to identify what is happening between these two characters.
98. Write an essay in answer to the following question:
Bridie: '... the war is over. And you and I are free.'
To what extent are these two characters now free?

Off-stage characters

There are several off-stage characters in this play. While the audience only hears the voice of Rick, other characters are also significant. In addition, the projected images of real people are juxtaposed with these characters.

Rick is the main off-stage character. We hear his voice as he questions the women in the interview scenes. He only asks questions and the

nature of these questions changes as the play proceeds. Rick's presence in the play highlights the notion of the manipulation of these women by unseen men. His position of power as he asks questions reflects the positions of power of the unseen men at whose hands these women have suffered in the past. There is also an uncanny sense that they may even suffer at his hands as we see in the scene where there is some doubt as to whether he has overheard the women's conversation.

In one sense Rick is the catalyst for the women's eventual reunion. He provides them with the opportunity of telling all. But he is not simply seeking to elicit information for the benefit of the women, and they are sensitive to the fact that in telling their stories they are vulnerable to his power to shape them to suit his own ends. In this sense it is no different from the situation of vulnerability and impotence that they experienced during the war, although the results are obviously likely to be less hazardous.

There are other characters who appear as off-stage characters in the present and in the past (both during the war and before the war). These characters are evoked through the dialogue. They include such personages as Lipstick Larry, Sheila's mother and Bridie's father.

Student activities

99. Examine all the questions asked by Rick. Explore any patterns in the questions and the ways in which he asks them.
100. Make notes on the dramatic function of Rick in terms of the ideas of the play as a whole.
101. Skim through the play and identify all references to other characters in the play.
102. Note who mentions each character and in what circumstances.
103. Identify the ways in which the various off-stage characters are connected with particular ideas or symbols in the play.

7. Writing about the play

Students should have the opportunity of writing about this play in a range of ways, including

imaginative recreations and analytical essays. The following selection includes imaginative recreation and analytical essay topics.

Imaginative recreation

104. Imagine that you have been asked to provide advice to a theatre company about the possibility of including *The Shoe-Horn Sonata* in a season of significant Australian plays. Write a submission outlining your view of the play and its value.
105. Imagine that you are Sheila. Write a letter to Bridie after returning home to Perth in which you reflect on the events in Melbourne during the taping of the documentary.
106. Imagine that you are Rick's script editor. Write the script for the documentary sequence about the war-time experience of these two women. Consider carefully the 'spin' that you are to put on their story.
107. Imagine that you have been asked to write an article for a women's magazine in which you discuss the usefulness of theatre for highlighting issues of concern to women. Write your article using *The Shoe-Horn Sonata* to illustrate your viewpoint.

Analytical essay

108. Misto's play is a complex dramatic unveiling of a monument to the women whose cause he is championing. How does Misto make use of dramatic devices to achieve this?
109. *The Shoe-Horn Sonata* is piece of chamber theatre that demonstrates the importance of personal loyalty and love. Is this all there is to the play?
110. 'the victims of history's worst—and least known massacre'; to what extent is this a description of the issue underpinning this play?
111. 'They are simply forgotten.' To what extent is this a play about remembering and forgetting?
112. 'This play is John Misto's monument to the Australian Army Nurses and to all those women and children who have suffered in war.' How does Misto create his monument?