

# THE BOY WHO TALKED TO DOGS STUDY GUIDE

STATE EDUCATE 2021



Slingsby and State Theatre Company South Australia present  
**THE BOY WHO TALKED TO DOGS**  
Adapted for the stage by Amy Conroy

From the book by Martin McKenna published by Skyhorse Publishing  
Developed with the assistance of draíocht Arts Centre, Dublin 15, Ireland

Resource created by State Educate. Support for State Educate comes from the State Theatre Company South Australia Education Giving Circle.

## SYNOPSIS

Young Martin is a misfit. Bullied at school and misunderstood at home, his only comfort comes from sneaking off to the family coal shed to bond with his German Shepherds, Major and Rex.

When things reach breaking point, the 13-year-old runs away from his home in Limerick, Ireland, and finds himself taken in by a new family – a pack of stray dogs. As they dodge trains, steal meals and fight for survival, Martin finds himself on the road he was always meant to take.

Based on the best-selling memoir, this rough-and-tumble tale, starring acclaimed Irish actor Bryan Burroughs, fuses shadow puppetry, swinging Irish music and stunning physical performance to bring ‘Dog Man’ Martin McKenna’s epic true story to the stage for the first time.

Beautifully adapted by Irish playwright Amy Conroy, *The Boy Who Talked To Dogs* is a magical and mischievous tale of transformation, redemption, and what happens when the underdog finds his pack.

For more, watch the trailer for the show online:  
[statetheatrecompany.com.au/shows/the-boy-who-talked-to-dogs](http://statetheatrecompany.com.au/shows/the-boy-who-talked-to-dogs)

THOMAS EDMONDS OPERA STUDIO, ADELAIDE SHOWGROUND / 25 FEB — 14 MAR 2021

RUNNING TIME  
Approximately 70 minutes (no interval).

SHOW WARNINGS  
Contains themes of domestic family violence that may be triggering to some audience members.

Those affected by the themes in the production can seek support from:

1800 RESPECT National Sexual Violence, Domestic Family Violence Counselling  
Service on 1800 737 732 or at [1800respect.com.au](http://1800respect.com.au)

LIFELINE on 13 11 14 or at [lifeline.org.au](http://lifeline.org.au)

KIDS HELPLINE on 1800 55 1800

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# CREATIVE TEAM & CAST



Author  
**Martin McKenna**



Playwright  
**Amy Conroy**



Director  
**Andy Packer**



Assistant Director  
**Clara Solly-Slade**



Songwriter  
**Lisa O'Neill**



Composer/Performer  
**Quincy Grant**



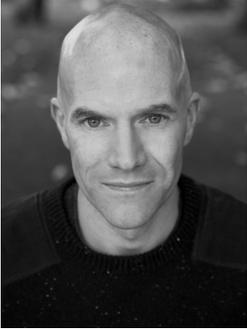
Set Designer  
**Wendy Todd**



Lighting Designer  
**Chris Petridis**



Costume Designer  
**Ailsa Paterson**



Martin

**Bryan Burroughs**



Muso

**Victoria Falconer**



Musician

**Emma Luker**



Cover

**James Smith**



Stage Manager

**Laura Palombella**

// Production Manager: Van Locker //  
// Venue Manager & Assistant Stage Manager: Gabrielle Hornhardt //  
// Technical Manager/Operator: Darian Tregenza //

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



## DIRECTOR'S NOTE FROM ANDY PACKER

As I write, we are three weeks away from opening this production. The world around is in chaos. Perth and suburbs are in COVID-19 lockdown, while 71 houses have been destroyed by raging bushfires overnight. Ireland, UK, Israel, Netherlands and Vietnam are in lockdown and close to 450,000 citizens of the USA have died from COVID-19. And yet, here in Adelaide, we come to work each day, unmasked, and make theatre. In this moment in time, it is impossible to know what future touring life this production may have, but I want us to remember the context in which we make this work.

Despite the pain being felt globally, there is an abundance of hope in the room as we bring Martin McKenna's remarkable story to the stage. Martin had experiences as a child that were incredibly traumatic. Children are powerless. They are the recipients of the world adults create for them. Globally, it is estimated that up to one billion children aged 2-17 years have experienced violence or neglect in the past year (World Health Organisation).

Now as an adult, Martin, with all the power he could muster, has shared his story in the hope it will drive change. Is it possible that a piece of theatre can make an impact on curbing that violence? I hope so. Certainly, ignoring these realities is unacceptable. I believe theatre can be an empathy machine, allowing us to gain perspective on other people's lives. We make *The Boy Who Talked to Dogs* with the power that we have as theatre makers, to amplify Martin's voice. Injustice is all around us. We all have a responsibility and the power to make changes to eradicate it.

To make theatre during a global pandemic is an incredible privilege that would be impossible without the passion, hard work and creativity of all involved. While the future remains unclear, we take each day at a time, making the most of every moment, hoping for a future that is filled with happiness. Perhaps this mirrors Martin's experience as a child. His persistence, resilience and creativity can be a guide to us all.

ANDY PACKER IN REHEARSALS FOR *THE BOY WHO TALKED TO DOGS*. PHOTO: JESSICA ZENG.



## AN INTERVIEW WITH ANDY PACKER

### **Can you describe the development process for this work?**

I first heard Martin McKenna on an episode of ABC Radio's *Conversations* with Sarah Kanowski, in 2016. After hearing his incredible life story, I bought a copy of his memoir and we contacted his publisher to explore securing the rights to adapt his story to the stage.

With Martin's story spanning Ireland and Australia, I thought it could be a great partnership between Slingsby and our friends and partners at draíocht Arts Centre, Blanchardstown, Ireland. I first met draíocht's Director, Emer McGowan, in 2006 at the Danish Children's Theatre Festival in the city of Nykøbing Falster, and over the past 14 years we have become close colleagues. Once I had shared the ABC Radio interview with Emer, she was hooked. We set about building a team of leading Australian and Irish artists to create a work that was intercultural, allowing us to capture the nuance of Martin's Irish childhood alongside his new life in Australia.

### **What drew you to this particular story?**

Martin's story is epic. The way he describes Limerick, Ireland, in the 60s and 70s really invites you into that world. Slingsby is drawn to telling stories about personal struggle, the individual climbing a mountain, finding a way out of the darkness, back to light and hope. These getting-of-wisdom, transformation or coming-of-age stories have power and resonance for our intergenerational audience. I was really drawn to Martin's ability tell his story, where so many things were against him, yet he apportions blame to himself as well as those around him. This honesty and taking responsibility are incredibly admirable and inspiring.

*Interview continues on page 8.*

ANDY PACKER (RIGHT) AND BRYAN BURROUGHS IN REHEARSALS. PHOTO: JESSICA ZENG.

I was also very drawn to the role that dogs played in Martin's life. Companion animals have increasing status around the world and I wanted to explore what this meant for Martin. I think a lot of people will be able to identify with the feeling that an animal – particularly a domesticated dog or cat – can understand us, have patience for us, when other humans (even ourselves) do not.

## **What makes this play and production unique?**

This production is an extension of Slingsby's exploration of immersive theatre. We love to put the audience into the world of the story. There is no dividing line between the audience and the performers. Both inhabit the same space, the same time, the same reality. This is something that no other artform can achieve.

When audiences come to see *The Boy Who Talked to Dogs* they really will become the community surrounding Martin when he was growing up. The story will take place in front of, around and amongst the audience. The proximity of the audience to the action may be akin to what is experienced in a small tent show at the Adelaide Fringe, but with the design and production values of a major work in a space that has been created especially for this story.

It is thrilling for an audience to be up close to virtuosic performers. The cast we have assembled for the show are outstanding and we are very excited to connect Adelaide Festival audiences with them.

## **How are shadow-play and music integrated into the production?**

At Slingsby, we aim to create a 'total theatre', employing many elements of all of the performing art forms alongside a very strong visual arts influence.

We are very interested in light, shadow and how the contrast of the two can echo the shadows that were perhaps thrown onto cave walls millennia ago, when people gathered around a fire to share in tales of the day. Shadow-play is often an element in our productions and we are thrilled with the way playwright Amy Conroy has written the idea of shadows in Martin's life into the script.

Likewise, music is always central to our theatre. All of our shows have included moments of song and through-scoring. We are blessed to have collaborated with composer Quincy Grant on all of our productions. His work for Slingsby has crossed the entire gamut and is a key ingredient in the emotional impact of the work.

As we started to put the creative team together for this show, I had dreamt of bringing Lisa O'Neill into the team. Lisa is a force in folk music and her non-sentimental, powerful lyrics seem the right fit for bringing Martin's story to the stage. These songs will punctuate the story, a little like an aria in opera. The songs will create space for the audience to swim around in the emotional state of the character and the situation, before spoken text takes over and the story advances.



LEFT TO RIGHT: ANDY PACKER, QUINCY GRANT, VICTORIA FALCONER, EMMA LUKER AND BRYAN BURROUGHS. PHOTO: ANDY RASHEED

## **What is your vision for *The Boy Who Talked to Dogs*?**

I hope we create a welcoming and exciting theatrical space for the audience to gather in to experience Martin's story. I hope, at the end of the show, audiences feel that they have been on a great journey together and feel more empathetic towards the predicaments faced by other humans and themselves. I hope the show helps people to love theatre even more.

## **How would you describe the role of a theatre director?**

My job as a theatre director is to lead a collaborative process; to create an environment and build relationships where each artist feels they can take risks, share instincts and create boldly.

## **What is your approach to preparing for a new work?**

I research broadly. Even tangentially connected material can spark an idea that gets to the heart of something. In the process of making theatre, we are constructing layers of understanding. Not all of this emotional dramaturgy will be evident to the audience, but it builds a scaffold that is solid and can support the cast and crew in maintaining the integrity of the work over many performances.

Previous Slingsby shows have toured across a 13-year period and to venues across many countries. For the cast to maintain the same intensity of performance, it helps to have deep internal logic and shared understanding about the ideas that underpin an image, a line, a song and the combination of all three.

My other approach to making new work is to trust my instincts and not be too afraid to cut things. I also believe that truth is in the detail, so we will spend many hours refining a tiny moment. In the end, I know that if I really feel something is not working then it will be better for the overall work to cut it.

A close-up portrait of Amy Conroy, a woman with short, light-colored hair, looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. She is wearing a patterned shirt with red, blue, and white tones. The background is dark.

## WRITER'S NOTE FROM AMY CONROY

Initially when approaching this play I thought I was writing a story about 'a boy and his dogs and all their adventures'. That would have been the sensible story, the popular story, the heartwarming story that sells.

But it wouldn't have been an honest story. To honour this boy's incredible journey, I had to start in the difficult places, the places we don't like to look. It's a lot easier, and infinitely more palatable, to turn away from all that messy stuff.

I am a playwright, actor and theatre maker based in Dublin, Ireland. I believe that theatre should provoke, enflame, move and delight in equal measures. I am compelled by a drive to shine a light on people, places or circumstances that are rarely seen, or rarely given much consideration. I am fascinated by what we understand on an intellectual level, but disregard on a human level. I also like to allow the story to inform how it should be told. I am of the opinion that theatre can change the world. It is a firm opinion, maybe uncool, maybe romantic, but firm. You can, however, only do that when you tell the whole story.

This is a story of survival.

Martin is the kid that is hard to like, he's the kid that makes people uncomfortable, even though they should know better. Those people defined Martin's narrative, telling him he was stupid, damaged, troublesome and awkward. They told him so often and so viciously that he believed them. Why wouldn't he? They didn't ask why he made them uncomfortable, or why he was troublesome, it was easier not to.

But Martin found his own way through; he survived in spite of everything. I wanted to honour his journey; I wanted to give this gloriously awkward, broken, brilliant and radiant boy authorship of his own story - in his own way. Ultimately it's a very simple one, it's a story of a boy who wants to be loved. And I do. I hope you do too.

# ABOUT MARTIN MCKENNA

Martin McKenna was born Martin Faul, one of three triplets and eight children, and grew up in Garryowen, Limerick in Ireland. He later moved to Australia and now lives in Nimbin, New South Wales.

The events of the play cover a period of many years in Martin's life, including the three years he spent living with a pack of stray dogs.

Martin's affinity with dogs has continued in his adult life and he released several books related to dog behaviour prior to the publication of his memoir, *The Boy Who Talked to Dogs*, in 2014.

Martin has created his own dog behaviour videos and has participated in multiple interviews, which each provide some insight into his history and who he is as a person.

Martin McKenna's YouTube channel:  
[youtube.com/channel/UCVxYV9F-wnr821V2f5EzVSA](https://youtube.com/channel/UCVxYV9F-wnr821V2f5EzVSA)

"How 'Dog Man' Martin McKenna became leader of the stray-dog pack" (Sydney Morning Herald): [smh.com.au/lifestyle/how-dog-man-martin-mckenna-became-leader-of-the-straydog-pack-20170308-gutcw5.html](https://smh.com.au/lifestyle/how-dog-man-martin-mckenna-became-leader-of-the-straydog-pack-20170308-gutcw5.html)

Interviews with Martin McKenna on ABC Radio's *Conversations*:  
[abc.net.au/radio/programs/conversations/martin-mckenna/7959054](https://abc.net.au/radio/programs/conversations/martin-mckenna/7959054)

## 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.

"This is a story of survival," says Amy Conroy. Think of something in your own life that you have 'survived'. This could be an illness, COVID-19 lockdowns, a particularly long detention or punishment, a tough sporting match - anything that was difficult for you to get through. (If you really can't think of anything, you might choose something that someone you know has survived instead.)

What helped you get through that difficult time? Was it one thing or many? How might you retell this story of survival in three quick scenes or retellings? Write a script for these three scenes or talk about your experience in pairs or a group.

## Supporting materials

Video interview with Andy Packer

Link under the drop-down menu for *The Boy Who Talked to Dogs* at:  
[statetheatrecompany.com.au/state-educate-resources](https://statetheatrecompany.com.au/state-educate-resources)

A photograph of actor Bryan Burroughs, who has a beard and is looking directly at the camera. To his right, a brown and white speckled dog is sitting and looking towards the camera. The background is dark and out of focus.

## CAST Q&A

with Bryan Burroughs  
(Martin McKenna)

### **How would you describe the character of Martin?**

Martin is a fascinating character. He sees and interacts with the world in a completely different way to everyone else. The world doesn't know how to deal with Martin, so they push him, they provoke him, they poke him and they lock him in a shed. They attempt to calm him down and ask why he can't be like everyone else. He's a man at odds with the world, but he's also at peace with the way he sees the world.

It's been interesting exploring this kind of character within a community of theatre makers who are working together and trying to find common ground. If Martin found himself in this environment, he would find it difficult and strange – through no fault of his own.

Martin McKenna describes himself as having ADHD and hypoglycaemia, and as someone who becomes erratic very quickly. In my performance, I have to find those things physically. It's about generating a lot of restless energy. For example, while sitting down, I might start with just my leg twitching and slowly work that up to my arm, finding different qualities and expressions of that energy. I've noticed that it unsettles other people and they start getting twitchy too. You become aware that that energy affects everyone. It has helped me to understand the kind of stress and pressure Martin was under around people. But the presence of dogs would elicit a different response. When he'd become erratic, they would help to calm and settle him. He would feed off their energy, feeling their heartbeats and breathing with them. I think that's why he identified more with dogs than with people. That idea of being more like a dog than a human helped him to meet and see the world differently.

PHOTO: ANDY RASHEED.

## How do you bring a character to life?

There are signs within both the book and the play that lead you to understand what the character of Martin is supposed to be like.

When I first get a script, I look for all the ways a character might be like me. Under what circumstances do I have that kind of energy? When do I get angry or distressed? When am I calm? When do I feel immense love for the people around me?

Next, I look for all the ways the character is different. What do I find difficult to access? What do I not encounter in my daily life?

Obviously, Martin is a real man, too, and there are videos and radio interviews of him available. When I've listened to or watched these recordings, I've noticed that Martin's voice is lower than my normal speaking voice. His accent is a little thicker and more pronounced than mine. Examining those similarities and differences is one way into the character – but with this approach there can be a danger of doing an accent rather than the character. I decided to slowly integrate his way of speaking into my words, drop my accent down and get a feel for it.

I'm using Amy's writing and Martin's book to interpret this character. I won't be trying to do an impression of Martin because he's such a unique, distinctive person – and we certainly don't look much alike. But I think Amy, Andy [Packer] and the team see a quality in me that they also see in Martin.

Physically, I'll think about the way Martin carries himself. He refers to himself as the 'runt of the litter', the small one. In reality, he's very tall – certainly much bigger than me. What's interesting is that I, as a smaller person, tend to carry myself with height. I lengthen my spine and try to make myself as tall as possible. When I'm being Martin, I need to consider that I think of myself as small and hunch a bit.

When I combine that hunch with the accent and the erratic energy I was talking about in my previous response, I've found a way into the character. The voice, physicality and energy are signposts that guide me into the character.

I also have to consider my relationships with the dogs, with Muso and with the audience. There's a direct relationship between Martin and the audience in this production. I'll come down and talk to the audience, engage with them and have a bit of a chat. If the audience chats back, that will help me to understand and know the character of Martin even better. The audience plays a huge part in bringing that character to life.

*Interview continues on pages 14-15.*



## **Is there any difference in the way you approach a character that's based on a real person to a fictional character?**

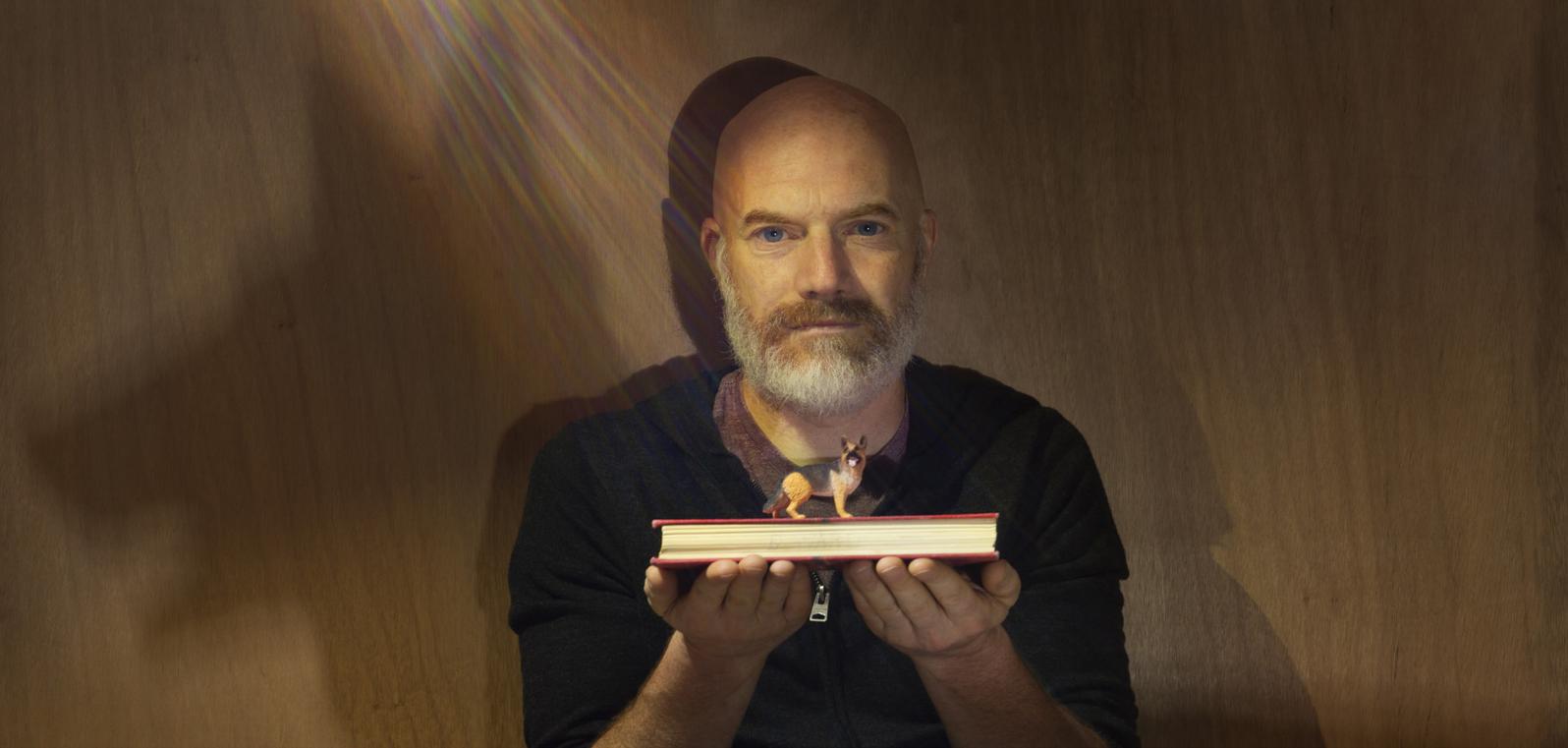
I've played a lot of characters based on real people over the course of my acting career. This has been coincidental; I haven't sought those roles out. I think you approach any character the same way. You try not to make any kind of moral judgement about them but seek to understand their behaviour. Most people are trying to be good and decent and kind and do the best for their lives so it's not for me to judge them.

If a character is based on a real person, I feel there's an added layer of responsibility to do them justice, to do right by them and to present them in as complete a way as possible. It's not that you change your method of approach but you feel compelled to go further for them on every level. It demands more of you because you want that person to be able to watch you, to recognise themselves in your performance and feel you're honouring them.

## **As Martin shares his memories with Muso and the audience, you play the parts of other people, like his parents and schoolteacher. How have you chosen to approach this?**

One approach would be to play each character as realistically as possible, but one of the things we observed about Martin himself is that he really relives moments when he's telling you stories. When he's recounting something from his past, he's filled with the emotions he felt at the time. When Martin is telling these stories and telling us about the different people involved, he becomes them for a few moments, before reverting to himself.

ABOVE: BRYAN IN REHEARSALS. RIGHT: BRYAN WITH A SHADOW PUPPET. PHOTOS: JESSICA ZENG AND ANDY RASHEED.



I've tried not to move away from Martin himself too much as he tells these stories, otherwise Martin disappears and I become another character. For example, there are moments in the play where Martin's father is aggressive and violent with Martin. I like to ensure there's still an aspect of Martin in the telling, but it's Martin if he were in an exceptionally bad or violent mood; it's a side of Martin that doesn't come out unless his father is present in the story he is telling. It feels more authentic to play this as Martin remembering how mad his father would get with him than to play it as a separate character.

### **What do you want the experience of the show to be for an audience?**

I hope the audience will experience an astonishing production where the music, text, costumes, lights and set are fully integrated with the story. I want young people to feel involved in the narrative and to come away feeling transformed and excited.

I find that being involved in a story and a character in theatre better equips me to deal with the outside world. It builds tools of communication and collaboration. I want people who come along to see the show to feel a sense of connection and like they want to be involved. I like theatre that is transformative, and I want that experience to extend from us, as creators, to the audience. I can't wait for the audience to experience this show with us.

*"You're my protectors, aren't you lads? Not like my brothers. Not like the others. You don't get angry or frustrated like humans. You speak my language."*

- Martin, speaking to dogs Major and Rex



## CAST Q&A

with Victoria Falconer  
(Musu)

### **What do you see as your role in *The Boy Who Talked to Dogs*?**

I play Musu in *The Boy Who Talked to Dogs*. As the name suggests, I am playing music and I also lead the band. I interact with Martin while he's on stage and act as kind of a host for the audience. As the story unfolds, Musu helps to bridge the gap between the external world – the world of Martin as an adult where the audience is present – and Martin's internal world of childhood remembrances. Musu seems to exist on both of those planes. I also feel like she lives in the future. Martin is always looking to the future and trying to find a good place for himself. That's where Musu comes in: she reminds Martin there's a future for him, even when everything is at its bleakest.

### **What are the main themes or ideas in the play? How does your character connect with these themes?**

There's a lot about memory in this play. It explores the way we remember things that have happened in our lives – both the awful, traumatic things and the beautiful, wonderful things. The way we remember things can change or be viewed in different ways. Rather than just retelling his past as he shares with the audience, Martin seems to be reliving those events. He starts to process them so he can move into the future.

The character of Musu plays an important part in Martin's process of remembering, reliving and moving on. Musu and the band provide the soundtrack for Martin's experiences. The music is so organically ingrained into the show and it's often the thing that helps Martin find his way into or out of a memory. It also acts as an indicator for the audience, providing an insight into what Martin is thinking about. Musu and the music work to bring the audience into the past and to take that journey with Martin.

ABOVE AND RIGHT: VICTORIA FALCONER DURING REHEARSALS. PHOTOS: JESSICA ZENG.



Muso is an interesting character. I've called her 'her', but it's not a gendered character. There's no other name for her besides the generic 'Muso' and you don't know anything else about the character. You don't learn anything else about Muso's past or background. I've actually wondered whether Muso is real or if she's this thing Martin's brain has created to help guide him through these difficult memories.

### **Can you tell us a bit about the instruments that you will play in the show?**

I'll be playing the piano accordion, which has such a full and beautiful sound for getting emotion across – and very Irish, too. I'll be playing the musical saw, which is literally a handsaw that I play with a bow. It's a very traditional instrument, although they used to use a stick or something similar rather than a bow. You use this on the smooth edge, rather than the serrated edge. You can also hit it with a mallet or do anything that makes a sound. There's no correct way to play it – if you're making a sound, you're doing it right. But it can be tricky to make it sound beautiful. In addition to that, I'll play second violin to Emma Luker, who is a brilliant violinist, and will probably pop on the piano a bit. I'll also be singing and maybe even playing a bit of percussion.

### **What has your experience of working on the play been so far?**

The mood in the room is so free and open. None of my questions or ideas are dismissed; they're always opened and explored. It's really inclusive and like we're going on a journey together – which actually mirrors the show, as Muso and the audience go on a journey with Martin. My exploration of Muso as a character has been interesting. She's kind of a narrator, on the periphery, and doesn't have a strong outward descriptor of who she is as a character. Andy [Packer, the director] has really allowed me to explore and investigate Muso's motivations without feeling like I'm taking up too much airtime or that I'm guiding the story in the wrong direction. I've felt really creatively valued and creatively involved.



## **What do you hope the experience of seeing the show will be for an audience?**

I hope that they will come in without any preconceived sort of notions or conceptions about the show, about the character. Because the real Martin McKenna now lives in Australia, a lot of people have heard of him and his life through his appearances on TV and from his books. But this play is an almost hyperreal, magical retelling of his story. While it uses his words and is absolutely authentic, it often transcends the earthly, realistic elements of the story – while still retaining a grittiness and darkness.

I hope audiences will witness Martin’s story and see how it relates to their own lives. Obviously, not many people have an upbringing like Martin’s, but there are going to be elements of the story that people can relate to. The audience will see Martin as he goes through these traumatic experiences and comes out the other side. In all our lives, there are difficult experiences or relationships that can place these pins of hurt in us. We can carry this pain with us for a long time and can struggle to find ways to work them out. I think people will feel that connection between themselves and Martin, and then carry that out into their own lives. I hope it gives the audience an appreciation for and understanding of other people’s experiences.

*The Q&As with Bryan Burroughs and Victoria Falconer are based on video interviews and have been edited for length and clarity. Video interviews are available under the drop-down menu for The Boy Who Talked to Dogs at [statetheatrecompany.com.au/education-resources](http://statetheatrecompany.com.au/education-resources).*

VICTORIA FALCONER (LEFT) WITH BRYAN BURROUGHS. PHOTO: ANDY RASHEED.



## THE BAND

As Muso, Victoria Falconer plays the leader of the band. The other members are Quincy Grant, who is also a composer on the show, and Emma Luker on violin and other stringed instruments. All three band members play live in the performance space throughout the show. They provide a soundtrack for the show that the adult Martin is starring in, as well as providing atmosphere for the childhood stories Martin recounts and relives.

*Read more about the role of music and the band in Victoria Falconer's Q&A (pages 16-18) and the interviews with Quincy Grant (pages 27-29).*



# EXPLORING THE CHARACTERS

## MARTIN FAUL

Martin is introduced as ‘the boy who talked to dogs’. Through his initial interactions with Muso, the audience quickly sees that Martin is in a dark place. The reasons for this start to be understood as Martin recounts events from earlier in his childhood. It is unclear how far in the past these experiences took place, but it is clear that Martin is still working through them. He gets caught up in the retelling, seemingly feeling all the same emotions during his reenactment that he felt at the time the events took place.

A triplet, Martin considers himself the ‘runt’ of the family. He feels unwanted, unexpected and different to everyone else. His reactions to things often seem extreme or ‘weird’ to his family, his teacher and his classmates. He is impulsive and does not always seem to think things through before he acts, which often gets him in trouble. If Martin grew up in the present day it seems likely he would be diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) as he displays many of the behaviours associated with this disorder. He often refers to himself as ‘stupid’ and asking himself ‘what is wrong with you?’, echoing what the adults in his life have said to him.

The acceptance and lack of judgement Martin receives from the dogs in his life is comforting. He feels as though he is similar to dogs in his physical responses to things like food, danger and trust. Martin’s relationships with dogs help him to better understand his own actions and the reactions of others.

As he works through his memories, Martin seems to recognise special moments among the loneliness and abandonment. Both during the events and as he reflects on them, Martin finds his place and his voice.

When recounting or reliving his memories, Martin introduces the audience to other people from his life, the main ones being:

**FATHER.** Martin’s father is not named in the script. He is known as a heavy drinker and is violent towards Martin and Sigrid.



**SIGRID FAUL.** Martin's mother and the person who seems to care most for him, although even she queries why he can't be like other people. She's originally from Germany.

**MR KEELEY.** Martin's schoolteacher bullies him and insults his intelligence. He gets the other children to gang up on Martin, too.

As each of these characters is viewed only through Martin's eyes, the audience naturally has a limited perspective on who they are as people. However, we still get a sense of their characteristics and personalities through his reenactments.

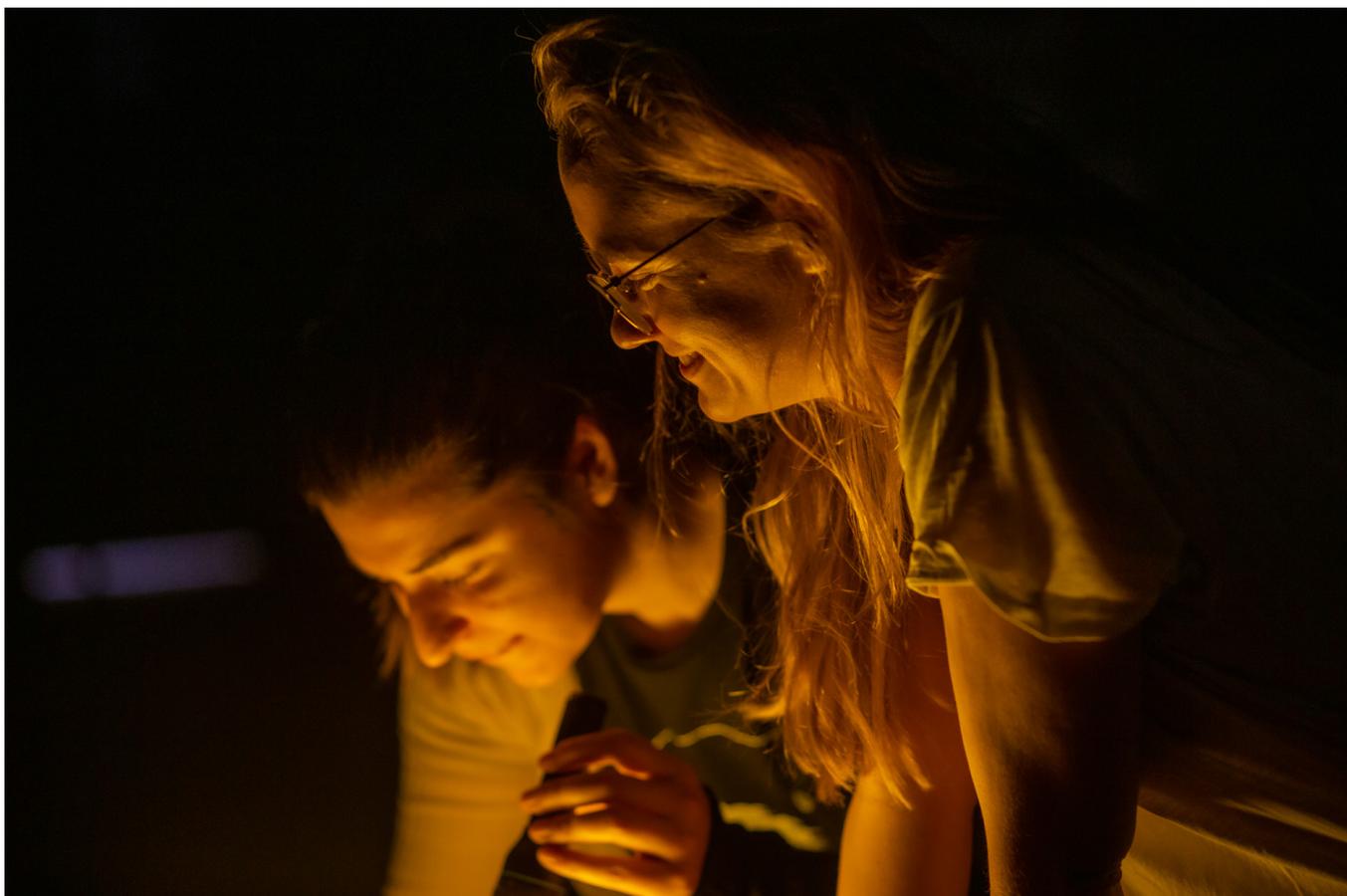
Martin also provides insight into the characteristics of the dogs who have played such an important part in his life - **REX** and **MAJOR** (the family's pet dogs) and **MOSSY, FERGUS, PA, RED, MISSY** and **SHADOW** (the dogs he meets once he leaves home).

## **MUSO**

Muso acts as a guide for both the audience and for Martin as he works through the events from his past. Her interactions with Martin help to frame the story and gently coax him into sharing his experiences. At times, Muso acts almost as a mother figure for Martin, prodding him into action and reminding him of his mother through her singing. She helps Martin recognise the moments of hope and connection within his story, guiding him to realise his own worth.

*"Maybe sometimes it's worth going through the dark cold layers to see the sunshine on the other side."*

- Muso, speaking to Martin



STAGE MANAGER LAURA PALOMBELLA AND ASSISTANT DIRECTOR CLARA SANKEY-SLADE DURING REHEARSALS FOR *THE BOY WHO TALKED TO DOGS*. PHOTO: JESSICA ZENG.

## What next?

Throughout the play, the audience learns about past events almost entirely from Martin's point of view, with some interjections from Muso. But what might the other characters have experienced during the moments Martin is recalling?

Choose one of the past events that Martin recalls in the play. Choose another character who would have been present in that moment - a family member, classmate, townspeople or even a dog; it might be a named character or someone who would have just happened to be present (for example, could someone have seen Martin steal food?) .

Rewrite the scene/memory from the point of view of your chosen character. What do they think about Martin's actions or the actions of others involved in the scene? Does their perspective differ from Martin's?

Optional: Perform the scene as a monologue, playing the different characters the way Martin/Bryan does in the play.

## Supporting materials

Video interviews with Bryan Burroughs and Victoria Falconer:  
[statetheatrecompany.com.au/state-educate-resources](http://statetheatrecompany.com.au/state-educate-resources)

A portrait of Wendy Todd, a woman with short, curly grey hair and glasses, smiling warmly. She is wearing a dark collared shirt under a textured brown jacket. The background is dark and out of focus.

## DESIGN ELEMENTS

AN INTERVIEW WITH  
WENDY TODD, SET DESIGNER

### **How did your work start on *The Boy Who Talked to Dogs*?**

*The Boy Who Talked to Dogs* is the story of a young boy, Martin, who grew up in Limerick, Ireland. As part of our research for the show, we looked into what life would have been like for Martin in Limerick as someone who was born and raised in the 60s and 70s. We looked at lots of images of the town he grew up in, and found lots of historical imagery, which is helpful.

When Martin was older, he moved to Australia, so there's that connection, too – a connection that we have, historically, as a country. The classic representation of this connection in Australia is an Irish pub, so we also took that as inspiration for the production. We're starting our show in an Australian Irish pub setting, but we also see key moments from Martin's life, which took place in his family's home, a hay barn, the backyard, under the culvert of a railway line, etc. We explored ideas about how we feature these locations.

The way we've designed this show is that, as you enter the venue, you'll see an Irish pub setting in one corner. This will include stained glass windows, fabric on the walls and a bunch of other stuff on the walls – the clutter featured in Irish pubs is just amazing and we'll try to capture that. The musicians will be within that space. The rest of the venue, where the audience is sitting, will include a whole lot of chairs and tables that will also help the audience to feel like they're sitting in a pub. We might even have a pub quiz going to make it authentically Australian!

Other set pieces will be in different corners of the venue but won't be obvious – they'll just look like big cupboards. As the show evolves and progresses, Martin will open the cupboards and the audience will enter his world, which will feel very real, almost hyper-real. The historical images of Limerick have been helpful in helping to build this world and the various settings in detail. We'll be including old wallpaper, kitchen items, things like rabbit traps and old picks that you'd find lying around a barn to help build this world.



## How would you describe the set design for the show?

Each individual set piece is very real; we're trying to reflect the grittiness of life for Martin. Rather than just telling the story, we want to be living the story, which is why keeping it feeling real is so important. We want people to get the sense of what life was like for Martin in Garryowen, Limerick in Ireland in the 1960s and 1970s.

The set is actually broken up into four sections, one in each corner. Tables for the audience will be located in between and there'll be a table in the centre of the room which Bryan Burroughs, who plays Martin, will stand on to perform at different times.

The action of the play doesn't move from one moment to the next moment to the next. Instead, it's broken up with storytelling and the narration of the action, coming and going from different parts of the set. With the set design, there's this gritty realism as Martin lives his story, which contrasts with the abstract of hearing Martin tell his story. By having this juxtaposition of real and abstract, and locating the set in different parts of the room, we can see Martin moving physically, as well as emotionally, between those different worlds.

## What was your process as you developed the set design for this show?

At Slingsby, we like to use the word 'adventure' to describe our work on a new show. We began the adventure of making *The Boy Who Talked to Dogs* a couple of years ago. It started with a process we call 'paths less travelled', which helps us to investigate the ideas and questions behind a story. *The Boy Who Talked to Dogs* is based on a book written by Martin McKenna and that was the starting point for our investigation work with this show. We spent a lot of time exploring the questions behind the work, narrowing it down further to the themes and ideas we most wanted to bring out in the story.



There were a lot of venue considerations for this design. The director, Andy Packer, pictured doing the show ‘in the round’, which means the set design has to operate very differently. The chosen venue is not a conventional theatre so there were a lot of technical and practical things to consider in that space.

During this process, it was important to spend a lot of time discussing the look and feel with Andy to make sure we were on the same page. We shared a Pinterest board, which allowed us to share images with one another as inspiration.

Next, I created what we call a ‘white card’ model. This includes structures of what the set is going to look like. It’s a basic framework that is used to indicate the direction we want to go in. Once everyone is on board with that, I create the set model by putting in all the textures and finishes to provide a sense of what the world will look like.

When the design is finished and has been approved, I take that to the production team or workshop. It’s really important that the workshop understands the ideas behind the play, as well as the nuts and bolts of the physical design. I know that sounds a little strange, but it’s important because that gives them context about why the various components are important and how the actors will interact with them.

At Slingsby, we create a whole world for the audience to step into. With this show, the experience starts in the foyer with an Irish pub feel. In the performance space, different set pieces will be revealed and the action will move around. This means the audience is engaging really closely. The idea is that it’s quite experiential. The audience will not be passive but will be a part of it. It’s quite a different kind of theatre experience.

PARTS OF THE SET MODEL FOR *THE BOY WHO TALKED TO DOGS* (ABOVE AND LEFT).  
PHOTOS: JESSICA ZENG.



ONE OF THE SHADOW PUPPETS BEING USED IN THE SHOW. PHOTO: JESSICA ZENG.

## **Can you talk about the role of shadow puppetry in the design?**

Shadow puppets are great for working with different scales and sizes. You can create a shadow that is very small or one that is very large, simply by moving objects and light sources closer together or further apart. The production also involves projection, meaning some of our dog puppets are made of light rather than shadow.

When deciding on the set design, we had to do some physical testing where we measured distances and thought about the kinds of light sources we'd be using. We had to make sure the size of the set could actually work with the physical constraints of the puppets and shadows or projections. For example, in the barn set we made sure we had places for all the dogs to sit. The scale of the dogs and how the sizes related to one another, considering the different breeds, was also important.

## **What do you see as the role of a set designer in the theatre?**

As a theatre designer, my job is to make the physical world that the audience experiences. I choose not only what's on the stage, but what's not on the stage. Choices are really critical as a designer. For example, if a scene was set in a milk bar, there are a lot of specific things I could choose to include that people could relate to and which would help them to understand the setting. If I include a Coca Cola bottle, that would be something many people could relate to. But Coca Cola bottles have changed over the years, so you need to make sure you have the right one for the timeframe, where that's applicable. The role of the designer is about detail and putting the audience into a time and a space.

*These responses are based on a video interview and have been edited for length and clarity. Video interviews are available with other show resources at [statetheatrecompany.com.au/education-resources](http://statetheatrecompany.com.au/education-resources)*



## COMPOSITION

AN INTERVIEW WITH QUINCY GRANT,  
COMPOSER/PERFORMER

### **How would you describe the composition and music for *The Boy Who Talked to Dogs*?**

This play has got a flavour of Ireland so we felt it was important to bring some element of Irish folk music into it. We have the wonderful songs Lisa O'Neill, the other co-composer, has written for the play. Lisa is a rootsy Irish folk singer who does very intrinsic, deeply felt folk songs, so she brings that Irish element. Because we're Australian musicians, the music also needs to reflect that background. These Australian and Irish folk influences are part of the character of the composition.

The other part is more cinematic and has a broader palette. So, for example, when there are big traumatic moments, we might step out of the folk and into a more cinematic feel, which could include using different instruments. With this change, we're sort of stepping out of the story and getting a birds-eye view of it.

Overall, the composition is a mixture of things – the folk element and the sort of cinematic approach.

### **Can you go into more detail about all of the instruments you will use?**

We've got three musicians in the show at the moment. I'll be playing my steel-string guitar, my guitalele and my mandolin, a beautiful instrument all the way from Canada. We'll use a keyboard to create a piano sound – we probably won't be able to use an actual piano as it's so big. We might also use the keyboard to play some other sampled sounds.

ABOVE: QUINCY GRANT WAITING TO BE INTERVIEWED. RIGHT: QUINCY (CENTRE) WITH MUSICIANS EMMA LUKER (LEFT) AND VICTORIA FALCONER (RIGHT). PHOTOS: JESSICA ZENG & ANDY RASHEED.



Victoria Falconer will be singing and playing the accordion. She can also play a bit of violin, keyboard and the musical saw so we'll see if we need her to play any of those. Emma Luker will be singing harmonies. Emma is a phenomenal fiddle player and violinist, and she may play cello as well.

There will be little bits of percussion, a tin whistle - I'm trying to get my head around the tin whistle, it's so loud I just have practice it tiny bits at a time. So a nice mix of sounds in there. Oh, and the bass clarinet.

## **Can you describe the process of creating the composition for *The Boy Who Talked to Dogs*?**

The process started for me in Ireland, visiting lots of Irish pubs, listening to Irish music and speaking with musicians. In Ireland, they have this thing called 'sessions' where part of the pub has a 'musicians only' area where musicians can play what they call 'session tunes' or other music. When I was touring Ireland with Slingsby's show *The Young King* the year before last, I gate-crashed a few of these sessions and sang a few songs. That was really the starting point of the process, getting that sense of the music, and I really wanted to draw on that in my composition. The choice of instruments was really influenced by my time in Ireland - using guitars, an accordion, the tin whistle, and the fiddle.

Working with the play, I wanted to bring out the other flavours and intensity in the story to help reflect the experience of the characters. It's a very dark play so there has to be some dark stuff happening musically. Seeing what the characters go through can be tough for an audience, but music can help the audience to deal with their emotions. Music goes to the audience's heart and invites them to find a way into the story or find their own place in the story.

It's a long process that continues during rehearsals as I keep developing ideas and finding flavours in the story.

## How does the composition reflect or connect with the themes of the play?

In this play, there are themes of loss, hardship and redemption, and these are the sorts of stories we're attracted to at Slingsby. Life can be a dangerous place, as we all know, and we want to find stories of people who are going through dangerous experiences and get into those themes. We want to get the audience to sympathise with the characters, to feel their pain, and to witness the way they get through this pain and difficulty. Martin McKenna survived a very tough childhood, as many people do, and I think we all need to see stories of resilience and survival on the stage. We all have to cope with hardship in life so we try to bring out those central themes in every story we do at Slingsby.

## What do you see as a role of a composer in theatre?

The composer is there to help bring out the story in the theatre and to help open people's hearts to what is going on. Composition also gives chances for reflection. If you think of films and how they work, you'll often find there are times where the storytelling stops for a moment – the narration will stop or the characters stop what they are doing or saying – and you have a musical moment. The image might focus on a scene or on people's faces. That break in the action or dialogue is often the moment where the audience will enter into the story or reflect on their own lives and find a place for themselves in the story. I think that's a really important part of music in the theatre or in a film; it provides a way in for the audience.

*These responses are based on a video interview and have been edited for length and clarity. Video interviews are available with other show resources at [statetheatrecompany.com.au/education-resources](http://statetheatrecompany.com.au/education-resources)*

## DIEGETIC & NON-DIEGETIC SOUND

*The Boy Who Talked to Dogs* features both diegetic and non-diegetic sound. Diegetic sound is noise whose source is found on the stage or in the action of the play. Although Martin is only recounting past events, rather than these events taking place in the present, many of the sounds used within those memories could be considered diegetic as they arise from the action that was taking place at that time - the barking of dogs or the sound of a car, for example. Some of the songs by the band would also be considered diegetic as they're part of the story and the action of the play.

Non-diegetic sound is added in and is not drawn from the action on stage - this is the case for the more atmospheric, background music played by the band.



## COSTUME DESIGN

AN INTERVIEW WITH AILSA PATERSON,  
COSTUME DESIGNER

### **How would you describe the costume design for *The Boy Who Talked to Dogs*?**

The costume design for this show is a stylised version of Irish small-town 1970s clothing. After working with director Andy Packer over many shows, we have developed a particular Slingsby style, and these designs reflect that aesthetic. They have a lived-in, eclectic feel with a focus on natural textures and a controlled colour palette. The designs are not slavish to the era of Martin's childhood as the show spans many years and has a timeless quality. There is a restrained colour palette of yellow ochres, greens, maroons and greys to compliment the tones of the set.

The costume for Bryan Burroughs, who plays Martin, is heavily broken down to reflect his rough living conditions. He has two versions of the same jacket, one too small and very broken down in order to show the passage of time for his character, and one better-fitting and cleaner for when he is a young child. His knitted vest has been hand made for the show. Other than Bryan, we have the three members of the band. Their clothing is brighter and cleaner, but still reflects a 70s feel.

The design brief included the need to dress the front of house staff. The show is set in an Australian Irish-themed pub. All staff will be dressed in green checked shirts with mustard-coloured aprons. I have designed a custom logo for the pub, named 'The Harp and Hound', and the aprons will have embroidered patches on them displaying this logo. Slingsby aims to create an immersive experience for its audiences; from the moment they enter they will encounter designed spaces and costumes to fully create the right atmosphere.

ABOVE: AILSA PATERSON AT WORK ON A COSTUME. RIGHT: COSTUME DESIGN DRAWINGS AND MOOD BOARDS FOR THE SHOW HANGING UP IN THE REHEARSAL ROOM. PHOTOS: JESSICA ZENG.



## How does the costume design emphasise or connect with the themes of the show?

The show has a theme of resilience. This is demonstrated in the costumes through the idea of endurance and the heavy breaking down of Bryan's costume. The costume itself shows the echoes of the tough times in his life, yet it lasts through his journey.

## What process or approach did you use to create the costume design?

The costume designs evolved from researching Irish clothing in the era of Martin's childhood, plus looking at references for contemporary Irish folk bands and pub staff. The vest for Bryan was so unique we had to get it custom made. We had it knitted after I selected the yarn to the exact colour palette for the show. There was a focus on interesting textures and painterly fabrics. The art finishing was a crucial technique employed to give a sense of the conditions Martin was living in.

*"You are the only ones who understand me."*

- Martin, speaking to dogs Rex and Major

# LIGHTING DESIGN

AN INTERVIEW WITH CHRIS PETRIDIS,  
LIGHTING DESIGNER



## What is the role of a lighting designer in theatre?

Ultimately, the lighting designer's role is to make decisions about how various elements of the show are illuminated. There are lots of parts of this decision, including: the brightness and colour of the light, the length of time that the light is up, the angle of the light, which elements are you trying to highlight with the lighting and which elements form the background. These decisions can be made in any numbers of ways but usually for me involve trying to convey some sort of mood or emotion.

## How did you become a lighting designer?

I started at school as an actor, was slowly drawn to the technical side of theatre and ended up loving working with light.

## How would you describe the lighting design for this show?

The design for *The Boy Who Talked to Dogs* is meant to be ultra-tourable. As such, a lot of the lighting is built into the set so there is very little setup when the show goes from venue to venue. This is also a great opportunity to create theatre 'magic' as we can have bespoke lighting solutions in unusual places.

## How does the lighting design connect with the themes of the show?

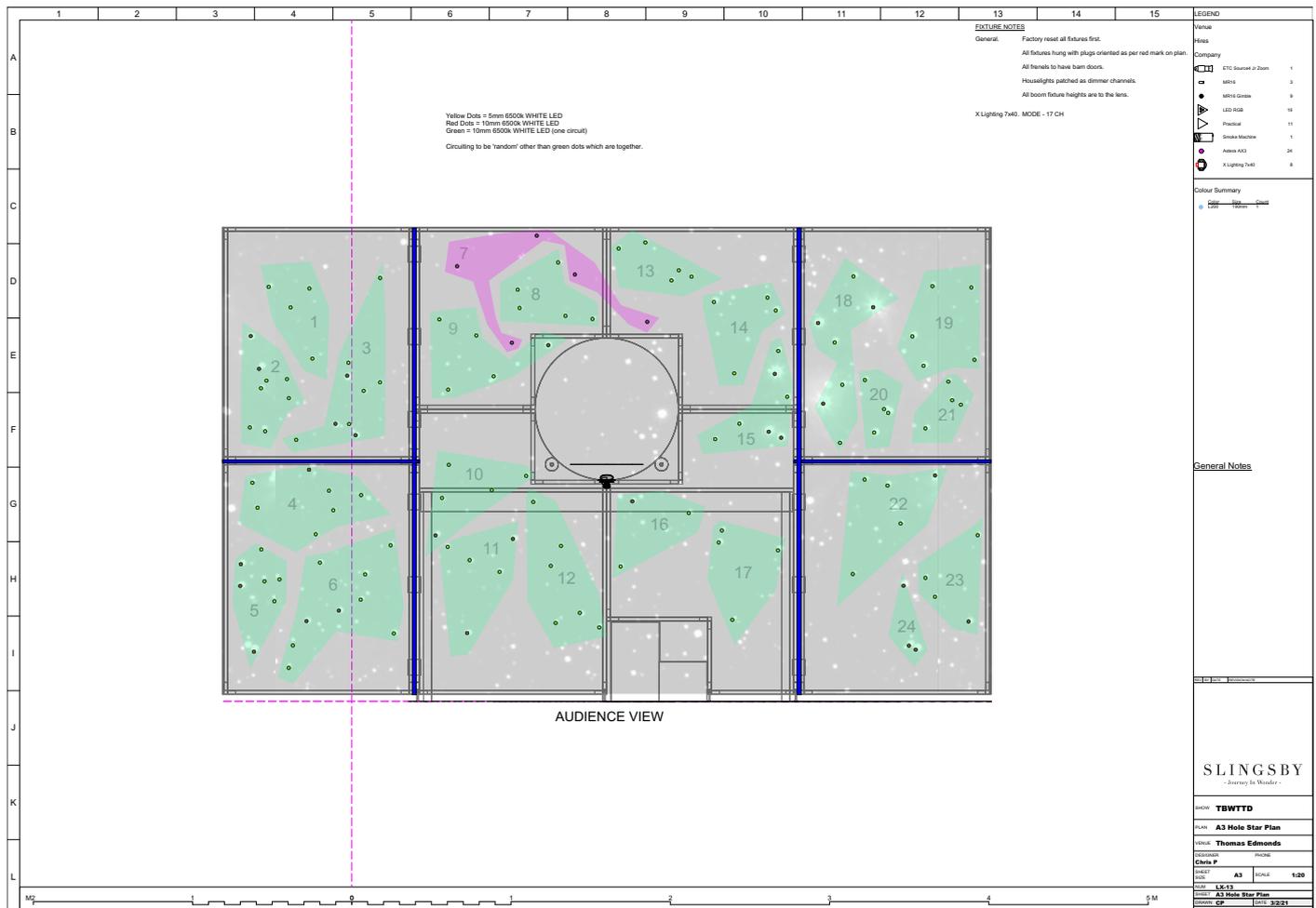
The themes are usually articulated pretty clearly by the text and performance, so I tend to be more interested in following the 'energy' and emotion of a show. I'm able to help heighten these through the use of different angles and colours. Timing and animation of light also play large roles – are the cues 'snapping' on and off, or doing a quick or slow fade?

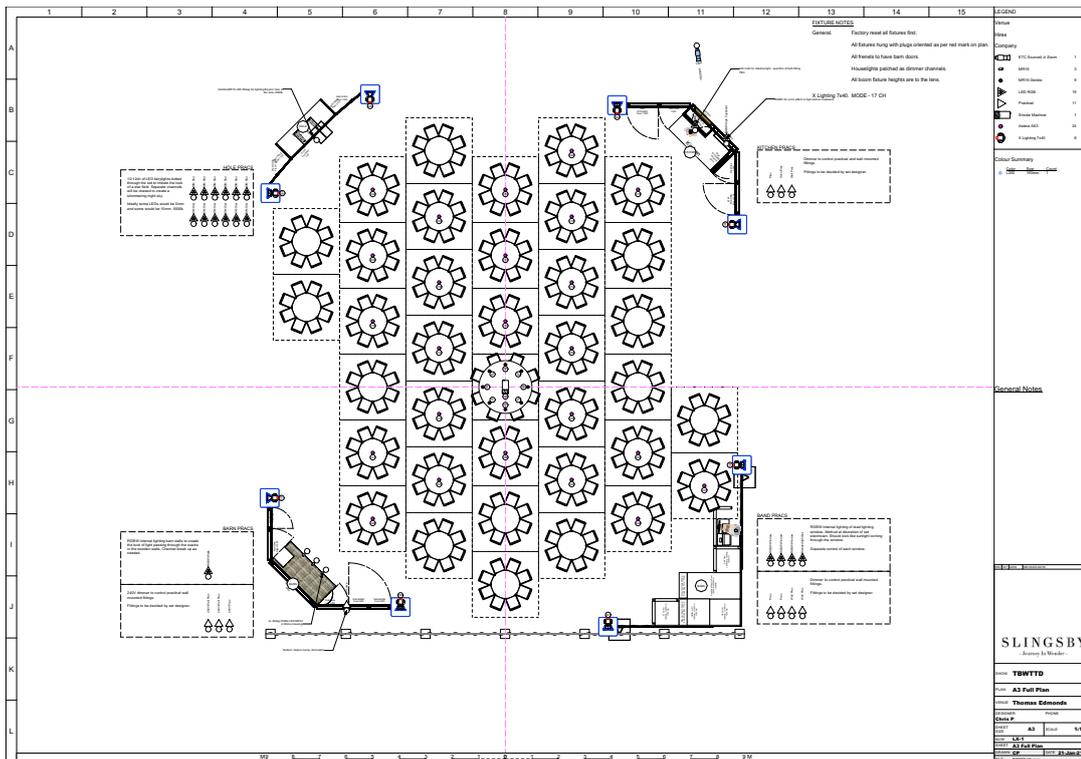
# What processes or techniques do you use to create the lighting design for a play?

Usually it starts with reading the play just for the sake of reading it. Then I read it again, thinking about lighting. I'll start talking to the director and the rest of the design team to discuss our various reactions to the play. Then I go away and gather or generate images that I think help convey how I think the lighting should look or feel. From there it is usually a matter of drawing a plan, costing the design and observing rehearsals to see what needs adjusting.

I can use one example from *The Boy Who Talked to Dogs*. There's a section of the play where Martin is laying in a field of stars. I used an image of the night sky and overlaid it onto the set. We then had set electricians working tirelessly to mark each of those points of light in the set and wire up a light for each of those positions. You can see the lighting plan for this section below.

My lighting plans are created in Vectorworks Spotlight. I then use a program called Lightwright to generate paperwork and manage data (channels, dmx addresses, wattage, etc.).





ANOTHER LIGHTING DESIGN PLAN BY CHRIS PETRIDIS FOR *THE BOY WHO TALKED TO DOGS*.

## What next?

Choose a type of design to focus on - set, costume, lighting or sound. Think about what sort of direction you might take with your design.

Would you choose a naturalistic design in keeping with the setting of the text or something more abstract? How would your design reflect the parts of the story relating to Martin's childhood and the present moment where Martin is interacting with Muso?

Think about the feeling you are trying to create with your design. List how the elements you have chosen might reinforce this feeling. How might you change these elements as the play progresses?

Create a mood board for your design - focus on a particular scene if that is helpful. For set, costume and lighting design, find or draw images and diagrams related to your vision. For sound design, find sounds or songs to create the feel you are seeking.

In writing or in a presentation, explain why you have made these choices and how your design connects with the story and themes of *The Boy Who Talked to Dogs*.

## Supporting materials

Video interviews with Wendy Todd and Quincy Grant:  
[statetheatrecompany.com.au/state-educate-resources](http://statetheatrecompany.com.au/state-educate-resources)

# FORM & SYMBOLISM

## IN THIS PRODUCTION OF THE BOY WHO TALKED TO DOGS

### Theatre in the round

Theatre in the round is a theatre space where the audience surrounds the stage. While this style of theatre was popular in ancient Greece and Rome, it has not been as widely used in contemporary professional theatre. The configuration effectively removes the fourth wall (the separation between performer and audience), which makes it ideal for productions that feature audience participation.

This production utilises this configuration with a large circular table in the centre, while also adding set elements to the different corners of the performance space. A sense of connection and intimacy is created as the performers move around the space, often bringing them very close to the audience.

### Circles

As well as being performed 'in the round', several set elements in this production include circles – the table at the centre of the room and the circular space in which Martin hides himself when he's at his most vulnerable. The performers and shadow puppets also move about the space in a circular manner.

Similarly, the story sometimes circles back on itself. The most obvious example of this is the reference to coal at the beginning and end of the play. Another significant example is the cake episode, where Martin's mother has worked hard to make a delicious treat for the family that is then eaten by an impulsive Martin; this is echoed when Martin works hard to get food for the dogs and is then appalled when they scoff down the food too fast and 'wreck' his plans. In both instances, the person who has worked on the food asks, 'what is wrong with you?' The central difference is that Martin then realises that they are simply behaving like dogs and are not doing anything wrong. This mirroring and circling back helps Martin to better understand different moments from his past.

The circles might also represent the way things in life often repeat and circle back, as well as on the circle/cycle of life itself.

### What next?

What is the fourth wall? Do some research on this concept. How does this production break the fourth wall? Why do you think it breaks the fourth wall? What does this do for the audience? Use specific examples and quotes from the play.



## THEMES & TOPICS

### **Belonging & Family**

In an ideal family, children are wanted, loved and safe. This is not the case for young Martin. His behavioural differences mean he often feels unwanted by his father and siblings, even at times by his mother. Martin struggles to find his place and a sense of belonging in the Faul house. Some children who have difficult home lives can find a safe space at school, but Martin is bullied by his teacher and struggles to make friends with the other children. He's a misfit who does not seem to belong anywhere.

It is with the dogs in his life that Martin finds the sense of safety and belonging that he lacks in his relationships with other people. Major and Rex are a source of love and comfort when Martin has been shunned and sent to sleep in the coal shed. Their presence seems to calm him, and he feels as though they understand him when no one else does. When Martin is threatened and bullied by his teacher, Major and Rex defend him – a response that would usually come from a parent. Martin is understandably distraught when the two dogs are torn from his life. Not only has he lost two of his strongest family relationships, but he feels as though it is his fault for being unable to control himself and, by extension, control the actions of the dogs.

Leaving home, Martin soon finds himself enmeshed with a pack of stray dogs. He is their provider and protector, taking on an almost parental role. He and the dogs enjoy the same things (moving, playing, acting impulsively) and need the same things (food, warmth, safety). They are a pack, a family of sorts, and with them Martin finds a sense of belonging.

Martin only seems to question his place with the dogs when he comes across other people. When he enters a warm home, he realises how much he misses those comforts he enjoyed when living life as part of a human family. When he sees his reflection in a mirror, he realises how different he has become to the boy he was when he started his journey. When he comes across a group of travellers who are singing and dancing, he recognises the different ways families and communities can live – and he misses his mother.



While Martin often finds what he needs in his relationships with dogs, he also seems to recognise that there is a possibility of finding belonging with other people.

## **Violence, Bullying & Safety**

There are several depictions of violence within this play, the majority of which are perpetrated by Martin's father. Father, as he is simply referred to throughout the play, is shown to hit his wife, Sigrid, and Martin when he is displeased with their behaviour – or sometimes for seemingly no reason at all. His rage is apparently fuelled by his trips to the pub and he has a reputation for drinking too much alcohol. The threat of violence and Father's temper seems to hang over the Faul household at all times. Martin is often berated for his stupidity and bullied by Father and the other Faul siblings. These acts of domestic or family violence mean that home is not a safe place for Martin.

Martin also faces bullying, and even the threat of violence, from his schoolteacher, Mr Keeley, and his classmates. Mr Keeley is verbally abusive and leads the other students to join in his taunting and name-calling. With the constant threat of bullying and abuse, school is not a safe place for Martin either.

When Martin leaves home and school, he finds relief from the bullying he faced. While he is freer with the dog pack than at any earlier point in his life, he is still not entirely safe. Stealing food and hiding away in a barn, Martin must avoid being spotted and captured - if he does not, he may face violence and removal to another unsafe space. The scarcity of food and warmth also means he is not physically safe, even when he is not under threat from other people.

LEFT: ANDY PACKER AND BRYAN BURROUGHS IN REHEARSALS. ABOVE: DRAFT IMAGES OF SHADOW AND LIGHT PLAY. PHOTOS: JESSICA ZENG.



## Memory & Perception

The events that unfold over the course of the play are all based on Martin's perception and memory. The audience naturally feels for Martin, as he's subjected to violence and bullying, and is generally misunderstood. Because Martin is telling these stories, the audience is not provided with any detailed insight into what life in the Faul house is like for the rest of the family before, during or after the events take place. We are only privy to Martin's perception of these events.

As Martin works through his memories over the course of the play, he starts to better understand the events that happened, his own role in them and how they have shaped who he is today.

## Coming of Age

This is not a traditional coming-of-age story, but the audience does see Martin grow up from a child to at least a teenager. There are several significant moments of revelation and self-knowledge over the course of the play that demonstrate Martin's personal growth.

Perhaps the most notable moment of Martin's growth is when he confronts Shadow. Martin recognises the energy Shadow is exuding and identifies strongly with it. When he felt this kind of energy in himself, Martin often found a sense of calm in the stillness and steadiness of his dogs, Rex and Major. To calm Shadow, Martin becomes still and steady himself, acting the same part Rex and Major had always played for him. In this moment, the audience sees that Martin has come to understand something fundamental about himself.

ABOVE: BRYAN BURROUGHS WITH PIGEON THE DOG. RIGHT: THE BAND DURING REHEARSALS.  
PHOTOS: JESSICA ZENG.



## Survival

Throughout the play, we see Martin endure family violence, bullying, verbal abuse and homelessness. Many people would be defeated by these things, and we do see how they affect Martin. As a result of his treatment, his self-talk is often belittling and he frequently calls himself 'stupid'. During his period of homelessness with the dog pack, we see Martin also become physically exhausted due to lack of food and shelter.

Rather than letting these things defeat him, we see Martin carry on and eventually grow as a person (see the section on Coming of Age). The real Martin McKenna is also a survivor who has made a life for himself in Australia, and we see that potential in the young Martin Faul of the play.

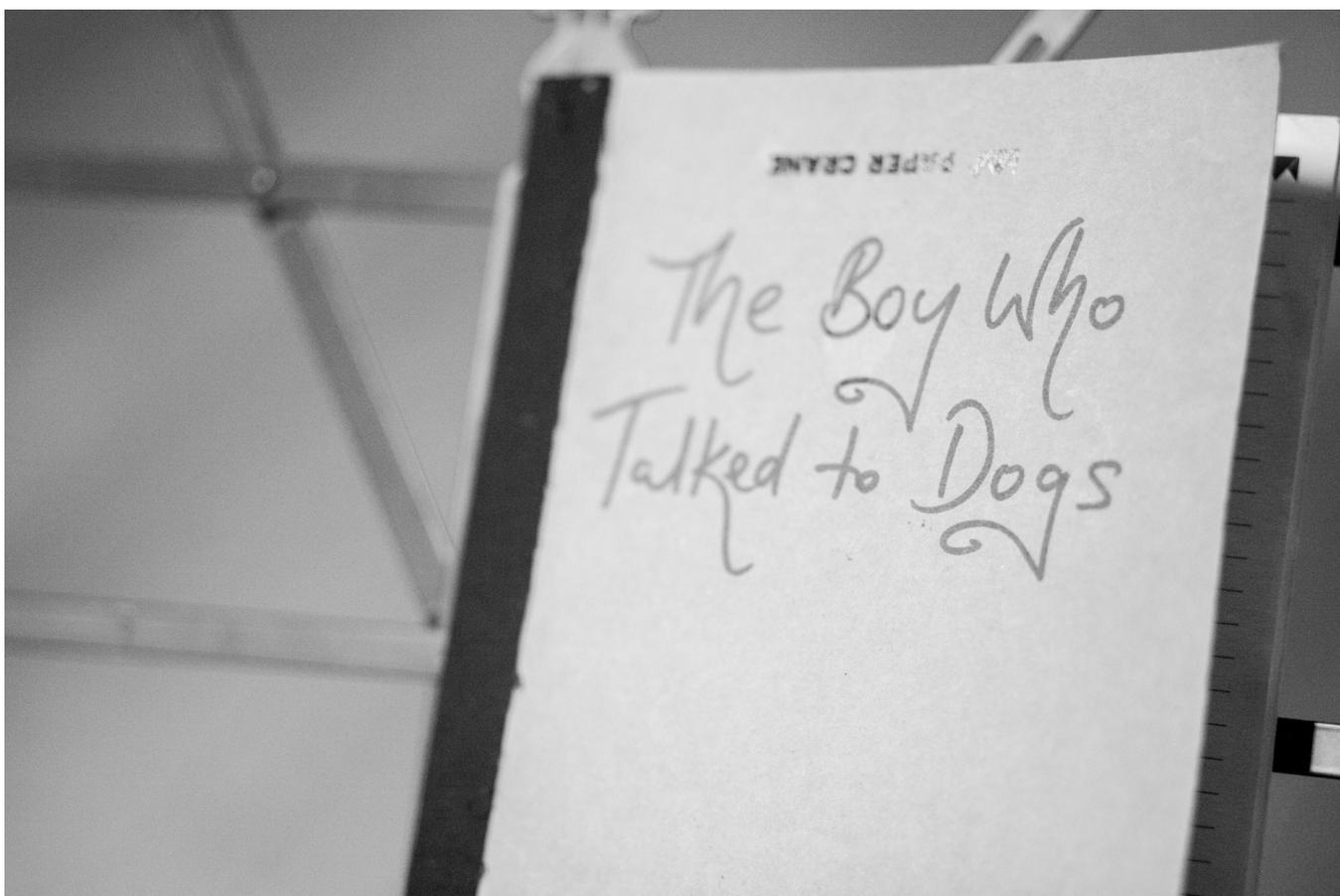
## Other Themes & Topics

Other themes and topics addressed in the work include redemption, youth and child homelessness and mental health disorders, particularly ADHD.

*“If you took a lump of coal and put enormous pressure on it, intense, powerful pressure... if you squeezed seven hundred and twenty five thousand pounds of pressure on it or for decades, for ages... do you know what you’d have?*

*A diamond. You’d have a diamond.”*

- Muso, speaking to Martin



NOTES FOR THE PLAY ON A MUSIC STAND DURING REHEARSALS. PHOTO: JESSICA ZENG.

## What next?

Choose a theme or topic presented in the play - it can be one of those addressed directly by the study guide or another theme or topic you noticed in the work. Write down at least two examples of times when this theme or topic was presented in the play. What do these scenes or moments say about your chosen theme or topic?

Browse a newspaper or news website. Can you find any examples of current news stories or events that reflect your the theme or topic? If so, how is this concept treated differently in the news today to the way it is treated in the play, which is set in Ireland in the 1960s and 70s?

If you can't find any examples in the news, can you think of any films or TV shows with a contemporary setting that include this theme or topic? How is this concept treated differently in a contemporary setting today to the way it is treated in the play, which is set in Ireland in the 1960s and 70s?

Write down your responses using quotes from the play and from the other media (news, film or TV show). Discuss your ideas and thoughts in pairs or a small group.

# FURTHER ACTIVITIES

## ACTIVITY

In a group, choose a scene, moment or memory from *The Boy Who Talked to Dogs*. Discuss how you would want this to be represented on stage. Make sure you consider all design elements – set, props, sound, lighting, etc. Write down your ideas or create a mood board.

Next, think about the characters involved in your chosen scene - these might only be Martin or Muso, or may include characters from Martin's memory, such as his parents or the dogs. Discuss whether you want different people to play the characters from Martin's memory or if you want to have them as impressions done by Martin. Think about what each of the characters might be feeling in that moment, how their feelings might change as the scene progresses, what they are trying to achieve in the scene and what might have changed in the character's life after the action or conversation involved in the scene. Think about the expressions and physicality that might accompany the emotions and actions of the characters.

If possible, create a minimal version of your chosen design and act out the scene. If there are important design elements that are difficult to simplify, describe these ideas to the rest of the class or your teacher before the group acts out the scene.

## WRITTEN RESPONSE

Write a review of this production of *The Boy Who Talked to Dogs*, taking into account direction, acting, design elements and audience response.

For guidelines on how to write a review, see our review writing resource linked in the dropdown menu for *The Boy Who Talked to Dogs* at [statetheatrecompany.com.au/education-program](http://statetheatrecompany.com.au/education-program)

## DISCUSSION

As a class, discuss the idea of 'coming of age'. What does this idea mean to you? What do you think it meant to come of age in the 1960s and 70s in Ireland? What does it mean in 2021 in Australia? Why do you think it has changed? How is it different across different cultures within Australia? What about internationally? How do you think this might change in future?

## ACTIVITY

Design a front of house experience or poster for this production of *The Boy Who Talked to Dogs*. Think about the audience, themes and messages of the production. How might you emphasise these in your design? Come up with colours and concepts, list your ideas and sketch them out. Create a final product (a poster, model or final design sketch). Ensure everything that is included is there for a reason.

