



STATE EDUCATE 2022

CHALKFACE STUDY GUIDE

State Theatre Company South Australia and Sydney Theatre Company presents

CHALKFACE

By Angela Betzien

SYNOPSIS

Chalkface is set in the fictional primary school of West Vale where we meet Pat Novitsky, who returns from the break with her closest friend and colleague Sue's ashes in a thermos. After years of dedication to the school, not one of her colleagues found the time to attend Sue's funeral.

Pat returns angry and disappointed, ready to ask questions of her colleagues. Denise, who has her own problems, is already there and explains the reason for her absence to Pat who warns her that if the principal, Douglas, hears this information he will use it against her; an early indication of the mistrust between the teaching staff and the principal. Pat is jaded and tired, of the system, of her colleagues, her principal, the parents and of her students. She has been allocated problem student 'Hurricane Little' who appears to have been the cause of much chaos in his years at school, and indeed should have graduated last year but his parents believe he is not ready, emotionally, to move on.

She no longer has her friend Sue to share this load with and to make things worse, the principal - Douglas (more at home in a board room than classroom) has replaced Sue with the fresh faced and inexperienced Anna, with her Masters in Neuroplasticity and child behaviour. Anna's belief that 'every child has incalculable value' leads her to offer to take Hurricane.

*Anna: I have a post it note on my bathroom mirror. I read it aloud every morning.
"Every child has incalculable value."*

Anna brings in a guinea pig, stating that studies suggest class pets enhance empathy and wellbeing and reduce aggression and poor behaviour in children. Fellow teacher Steve, who has his own negative experience of Hurricane, arrives and is railroaded by Pat to try to take Hurricane, who is loath to pass him on to Anna.

Throughout the play we also notice that all is not as it seems with the maintenance and upkeep of the school with the office manager, (recently sacked from the banking industry) Cheryl Filch, spending a lot of time near the paper shredder. This is noticed by Pat and Anna as they increasingly come together throughout the play, spending the night at the school sleepover and discovering that underneath Pat's gruff exterior and Anna's sweet outlook they are a lot more alike than they thought. The relationship between Anna and Pat grows as we realise that they have history. In her younger years Pat pioneered an innovative literacy program and was known as a pedagogical guru.

Anna's desire for a playground and her quest to find funds for it leads her to some interesting discoveries about the finances of the school which further brings Pat and Anna together as they conspire to discover what is happening.

Book Week arrives and after an incident with the classroom guinea pig Anna finds herself abandoning the classroom, leaving her students unattended. The staff come together to help Anna and manage the crisis. Pat heads off to account for all students only to find Hurricane Little missing.

From here things escalate and we find that the forces of Filch, Douglas and underfunding come crashing around them, but yet pulling together.

DUNSTAN PLAYHOUSE: 5 AUG — 20 AUG 2022
SCHOOL PERFORMANCE: 11 AUG 2022

RUNNING TIME

Approximately 105 minutes (no interval).

SHOW WARNINGS

Contains coarse language, mature adult themes, smoking. Ages 15 +

Resource created by Fiona Lukac for State Educate. ©

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

CONTENTS

INTRODUCING THE PLAY

Cast & creative team	5
Writer's note from Angela Betzien	7
An interview with Angela Betzien	8-11
Director's note from Jess Arthur	12
An interview with Jess Arthur	13-14
What next?	16

CHARACTERS & CHARACTERISATION

Cast Q&A: interviews	17-20
Characters/Roles	21-24
What next?	24

DESIGN

Design elements: interview	25-27
Costume Design	28-29
Sound Design: interview	30-32
Lighting design: interview	34-35
What next?	35

DIGGING DEEPER

Themes & Concepts	36-39
What next?	39
Interesting Reading	41-42
Script Excerpt	43
Further activities	45

CREATIVE TEAM & CAST



Playwright
Angela Betzien



Director
Jess Arthur



Set/Costume Designer
Ailsa Paterson



Lighting Designer
Mark Shelton



Composer & Sound Designer
Jess Dunn



Assistant Director
Clement Rukundo



Performer
Ezra Juanta



Performer
Catherine McClements



Performer
Michelle Ny



Performer
Nathan O'Keefe



Performer
Susan Prior



Performer
Stephanie Somerville



Stage Manager
Bridget Samuel



Assistant Stage Manager
Carmen Palmer



CHALKFACE CAST WITH JESS ARTHUR AND JESS DUNN - PHOTO: MATT BYRNE



ANGELA BETZIEN: PHOTO JESS ZENG

WRITER'S NOTE FROM ANGELA BETZIEN

As the child of two teachers, I grew up around teacher talk, their jokes and stories, particularly the stories of notorious students. One kid, Screwdriver, loomed large in my imagination. I don't remember his real name. He was bestowed that moniker for bringing a screwdriver to school and threatening a teacher with it. I don't know what happened to Screwdriver, I hope he's ok, I fear he's not. This play is for him, an apology even, for the systemic failures which prevented him from reaching his full potential.

Chalkface is also a whack love letter to all those teachers who've taught us to read, write and most importantly, to think. At the end of 12 years of education, the skill I want my children to possess more than anything is critical thought, the ability to discern truth from lies, so they can question and when necessary, resist. In an uncertain future those qualities will be more important than ever.

Acknowledgements:

Polly Rowe, without her constant encouragement and faith this play would not exist.
Jess Arthur and the whole Chalkface team.

Brianna Pike.

Sue McIntosh, Nadia Winsor, David Engelbert, Leigh Melville, Amy Findlay, Mo Rahman, Adam Moulds for their insights into the highs and lows of teaching
Anita Belgiorno-Nettis AM and Luca Belgiorno-Nettis AM for their residence and hospitality.

Peter Matheson.



ANGELA BETZIEN: PHOTO JESS ZENG

AN INTERVIEW WITH ANGELA BETZIEN

Can you talk more about the journey of writing this play from the initial idea to the process itself?

I have for a long time wanted to write a play about teachers and teaching culture and primary schools; maybe 15-20 years I had been thinking that. I grew up among teachers, my dad was a teacher, so that culture was very present in my childhood. It was a culture that was very old school and problematic in that sense as well.

This play began with discussions with Polly Rowe at Sydney Theatre Company. She wanted to commission a new work from me and I had been moving more into writing for screen, so for me I wanted to challenge myself and write a play. We talked about what that challenge looked like and the idea became that it would be a comedy. I have never written a comedy exclusively. I have a reputation for dark and harrowing work, so that was a big challenge. One of the big things we kept coming back to was the idea of community – and this was just before COVID. I was just really interested in places where community existed and where it was failing. So I started to look at different communities and realised I wanted to look at school communities. It's reaching audiences in a really direct way because we all have either gone to school, have kids at school or are a teacher at school.

Teachers are particular type of people - they start to adopt a language that goes into their private lives as well. Dad and his teacher friends would talk endlessly about students and their most notorious students over the span of their teaching career and how they ended up, and sometimes it was surprising and sometimes quite unexpected.

What research did you do for the play?

I have read about the Australian education system, the underfunding of the public system, global standards of education and this obsession overall we are having with testing and measuring students, which is such a flawed concept. There's a line in the play that says "you don't fatten a pig by measuring it" and it's a line a teacher actually gave to me; this idea that you don't learn through testing. We are obsessed with it and it's not working and we need to get back to the roots of what learning and teaching actually is.

It's a system that's in crisis at the moment. There's a great Finnish educator and theorist at the Gonski Institute (Pasi Sahlberg) and he writes a lot about the education system globally and the importance of play and the lack of play deficit that exists in children's lives and the effect it's having on their mental health. I am intrigued by that and that's an element/an idea in *Chalkface*.

I engaged with lots of teachers as research. I interviewed Australian teachers and teachers in the UK and heard their stories about how they got into teaching and what their experience was like. That greatly influenced me. I Zoomed some teachers in the UK and they were fantastic. John Saunders who was the Education Manager at STC introduced me to a number of teachers and there was one in particular who was just brilliant. I met with her three times and we chatted over a glass of wine about school life...she was brilliant, quite sardonic, but really terrific. She was such a passionate teacher, you could sense the devotion she had to her students but she was cynical and critical of the system and her workplace culture but also demonstrated great solidarity with her teaching colleagues. She was really funny, a real character. I spoke mainly to teachers that were toward the end of the career, the twilight of their career, to early sort of graduates and then teachers who were teachers who weren't anymore because they burnt out. They paid a price for a workplace culture that was quite toxic. I think it's about a system that stops them from doing the real work of teaching. There's so much admin and fear around liability and that has stopped them from doing the real work that they loved, the thing that brought them into teaching in the first place. This idea of being on the ground with kids, the idea that a teacher can change a kid's life and their trajectory – they were all passionate about that.

How do you see the characters of Pat and Anna?

I think Pat and Anna are quite similar. They're adversaries but not dissimilar – they come from different generations and that's a sticking point but ultimately I feel like Anna is a version of her. It's the system that has really worn Pat down and created this kind of cynicism.

You've previously said the idea of lost children is present in lots of your plays, can you talk more on this and in the context of Chalkface/the character of Hurricane Little?

The idea of the lost child is definitely a recurring theme in my work and usually my plays have children or young people in them. I really wanted to keep the child characters outside or beyond the limits of the space in this play though. Our children are facing a very uncertain future and as a parent, I feel a sense of dread about that. Life is harder for our kids, the cost of education, housing, everything, not to mention the crisis of climate change. I feel responsible for that and I question whether we are preparing them for that future... our education can be part of that. We need to equip kids with the tools to act, to be activists and help change the world. There's so much talk about the culture wars in schools - conservatives want to hide the truth of our history from young people, to limit their perspectives. I'm so against this. I think we need to be upfront or there's going to be a terrible backlash. A terrible sense of betrayal.

I guess Hurricane represents those kids who are round pegs in square holes - the kids who don't fit the cookie cutter model of education and need a specialist education to really flourish. I'm interested in those young people who are wild, who are rebels because they often grow up to be our leaders, our original thinkers but the system shuts them down. Just think of Greta Thunberg - a neurodiverse kid who cuts through the crap. What a superpower.

With the internet and Google, we like facts. We don't need to rote learn that kind of stuff anymore because we can look it up. We need to go deeper with our learning which is about critical thinking and arming kids with the ability to read truth.

What do you want audiences to get from this play?

I think ultimately I want people to walk away with a sense of how important our teachers are.

Jane Caro writes a lot about education and the value of our public system and she says our democracy is at stake and if we don't provide quality education to all people then we are doomed, our democracy is doomed. And it benefits everyone for everyone to have good quality education. We need to invest in young people, in our future. We need them to have the opportunities to reach their full potential. That's the right of every child. We are all part of the school community in some way or another whether past or present. Audiences will be able to recognise their communities in this play, I hope.

What have you noticed about the current education system through the eyes of your children, particularly during the pandemic?

My oldest is in a state primary school in Sydney and he's in Year One now and it's marvellous how he can now read. I would never have been able to teach him to read. I am in awe of teachers, they get these little people to do these incredible things, it's such a gift.

In the first year of the pandemic homeschooling was extraordinarily difficult and the impact on their socialisation was really potent. We noticed such behavioural changes that then just disappeared as soon as he went back to school and we are being reminded of how important peers are to young people. My little one is quite gender fluid and I am in a same-sex relationship and the school is really open and supportive of that. It is very inclusive and that in itself is something that is radically different from when I was at school.



DIRECTOR'S NOTE FROM JESSICA ARTHUR

Chalkface is a play that celebrates rage, rebellion and difference - qualities that are innately present in all of us, yet can be stamped out through institutions. I recently sat down with a group of teachers who were reflecting on their practice and how it has been impacted through and after the pandemic. There was a fascinating crisis of purpose; not a personal one but a political one. The shared sentiment was that the system does not allow for the teachers' individual expression. Education itself has become suffocated by bureaucracies of standardised testing, of streamlining and a lack of open-ended play. There is a reason why recent striking teachers are demanding "more than thanks" for the crucial work they do, as it suggests policy makers have not been listening to them. Exhausted teachers are a reflection of a broken system.

As we have explored *Chalkface*, we have been encouraged to think about the systems we all exist in; about intergenerational collaboration and the hope that can come through the shared connection of purpose and learning. Young people are deeply concerned about the world and the societal transformations required to meet the needs of the future; yet our educational and political establishments remain static, impervious to the voices of children. The School Strike for Climate demonstrates young people are taking democracy into their own hands - rules need to be broken to show a pathway forward. No doubt that great teachers have provided them with the motivation and self belief required to do something as drastic as to be the voice of reason to those in power. There is a link between the strength of children's conscience and the purpose driven love of teachers. All that is required is for those in power to meet them all where they are.





JESSICA ARTHUR: PHOTO JESS ZENG

AN INTERVIEW WITH JESSICA ARTHUR

What first drew you to this play?

When I first read this I was really drawn to the beautiful humanity of it. It was quite unexpected, and also finding the humour in it. It is quite dark, and does push things to the edge but I think there is something in the timing of it. It is so relatable for everyone. For everyone, whether you went to school or not, you are constantly learning off someone, we never stop learning and I think that is a beautiful message within this; particularly in this world where students have all been homeschooled during Covid and the importance of teachers was highlighted again.

What is the central theme or message of Chalkface?

Something we have talked about a lot is the community and the camaraderie within it; it is quite beautiful. It also deals with challenge, it challenges the system a lot. It challenges the systems that we exist in, and that we never question or rework them. It is great because we are looking at a school specifically, the education system, but I think that it is speaking to capitalism on a bigger level. If we can't change the curriculum and how we learn then we can't start to question the world and who we are and how we interact with things. If we can't change that or update that, then we are in a losing battle. We are starting in the wrong place. It is looking at cycles and history and community and what one person can do and what a community can do. We have big challenges we need to face trying to help the kids. I think also that there are themes of kindness, hope and acceptance. Ultimately the characters give something to each other.

What is the style/tone of the play?

It is a black comedy. There is a lot of heart, it will pull you to a place you don't expect. The characters are deeply flawed, but also exceptionally endearing. They are real, and there is something very truthful about them. There is something amazing with the truth that the actors are finding in the characters. But they are also just really burnt out. Especially after the last few years this is something really relatable about what these characters are about.

Why do you think this play will resonate with teachers in particular?

I think they will feel seen and heard. Angela has done a lot of research and has such respect for teachers that it shows through. We have been chatting in the room and everyone has a teacher that has influenced them, in a small way or hugely affecting way, or in a funny way or sad way. Maybe it will be a bit confronting! I do think it is kind of a love letter to teachers that Angela has written.

What do you find most enjoyable about directing this play?

I really love the throughline, or theme or idea, about Chernobyl. There is a real image of the decaying buildings, not just the physical structures and the relationships but also how we are creating the future for the students. This is slowly massaged through the play, and will become a bit more apparent once you have seen it.



JESSICA ARTHUR AND MICHELLE NY PHOTO: JESS ZENG

Script Excerpt

Douglas: You talked Hurricane off the library roof last year. No one else could have done it.

Douglas turns to Anna.

Douglas: Ms Novitsky was quite the hero.

Anna: I believe it.

Pat: I regret it now.

Douglas: She doesn't mean that.

Pat: I wish he'd gone splat. Brains all over the hand ball court. What I should have said is, go on Hurricane, jump. Get on with it so we can all go back to learning present and past tense with some relevant examples. Hurricane Little is alive. Hurricane Little was alive.

Douglas: Ms Novitsky's being facetious.

Pat: Who do I have to blackmail to get him off my list?

Douglas: Why don't you write that question down on one of these coloured cards using constructive language and pop it in our new suggestions, complaints and questions box?

Pat: Here's a suggestion.

Pat draws a large cock and balls on a yellow card and pops it in the box.

Anna: A suggestion box, what a cool idea.

Douglas: It's a new initiative I'm trialling. All reasonable suggestions will be considered in due course.

Pat: By who?

Douglas: Consultative committee.

Pat: That's you is it Douglas?

Douglas: Myself and Ms Filch.

Ms Filch stalks into the room and goes to the photocopier.

Pat: Speak of the devil.

To Anna

Douglas: Ms Filch is our/ delightful -

Pat: demonic

Douglas: - Office Manager.

Anna writes this down in her notebook.

Anna: Hello. I'm Anna.



STEPHANIE SOMERVILLE AND NATHAN O'KEEFE PHOTO: JESS ZENG

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.

Think about the space that Angela has created and the action that happens in the play. What style has Jessica applied to the performance? What are the themes that you picked up? Explain how these themes are present in the play.

Try to remember a moment from your schooling where a teacher has had a significant moment on your life. It could be negative or positive, try to write this into a scene, noting points of conflict or tension. Read or perform this with others.



CAST OF CHALKFACE: PHOTO MATT BYRNE

CAST Q&A

CATHERINE MCCLEMENTS

How would you describe your character, Pat Novitsky?

I think Pat is an excellent teacher, but other people think she is old and bitter, a teacher who has been worn down by the system. Her best friend dies at the beginning of the play and no one turns up to the funeral. She is just starting to think 'what is the point of it all, of all this care for the students', and so this is where the play starts, with her questioning everything that she has done but throughout the play there is the sense that actually it is still in her DNA. She can't stop caring about these kids that she teaches, no matter how many wisecracks she makes or how much cold water she pours on the profession.

She can't finish her teaching in this state. She wants to finish on a high. The system has beaten her down, and she has sacrificed everything, she is divorced and her children no longer talk to her. All she has left is the children and her teaching, so it all has to mean something - otherwise what is the point?

There is something that irks her about the whole idea of 'reward' - what is the reward for the sacrifice that she has made? She feels that there is a danger in constantly seeking approval, schools are often based on stickers and stamps and rewards. However for Pat there is something more to it than stickers, there is also the idea of community where they all come together. The reward of knowledge, of support and realising another young child's 'potential'.

How did you approach researching for the play?

Fortunately all of us have a connection with teaching, and teachers, through our

own experiences. Teachers that I have had, that I have known through my children's schooling along with having friends that are teachers. Some of my best friends are teachers.

I recently visited a primary school and spent the morning in a junior primary classroom as a reminder that teaching is about the children. It is important to remember the focus because while the play is set in the staffroom there is this overriding objective of trying to care for these children.

Do you have a particular method to find the character?

Apart from mining the text for the obvious clues that the writer provides for the character as a starting point, for me it is sort of through osmosis. It slowly starts to happen, sometimes without you even knowing. I don't like to put too much on top of the character before I get in the room. I might have images in my head but I try not to plant too much on top of the character too soon, because it can become a bit caricature. Things like shoes, costume always help so it is useful to have those early in the process, certainly things like shoes which help with the physicality of the character.



CATHERINE MCCLEMENTS: PHOTO JESS ZENG

Script Excerpt,

*Pat: I've dedicated my life to teaching, to my kids. Not my own, neglected them. They could have been reading Enid Blyton for all I knew. I was always at school, meetings, conferences, f**ing fetes. Where'd it get me? Where'd it get the school? What good did any of it do? We're going backwards fast. Numeracy, literacy, science. Don't start me on the really important skills like critical thought. We're going to be the dunce capital of the world, a population utterly unprepared to face the future. We'll all retreat inside our own conspiracy-stained Anonymous arseholes. So if you think I'm bitter, if you think I'm burnt out, well, there it is, that's why because nothing I've ever done or ever tried to do has made the slightest difference.*



STEPHANIE SOMERVILLE PHOTO: MATT BYRNE

STEPHANIE SOMERVILLE

How would you describe Anna?

She is a young teacher, full of energy, with a very positive outlook on life. She is very switched on and is very smart. At the start of the play she really believes in the ability of education to change lives.

She brings with her some great hope to change the school for the better. A part of this is the fact that she comes in with the memory of what her school did for her. But she is also a little bit deluded with the idea of what she is going to encounter when she gets there. She finds it quite a shock to discover that it isn't as she remembered. How it has gone downhill and how embittered that the teaching staff are.

How did you prepare/research for the role?

Well, fortunately both my parents were teachers so I feel like it has been in my background. When I first read the script there were so many things that reminded me of my mum and her experience. It was a great opportunity to really connect with my mum, we went out to dinner and asked her a lot of questions. It was really useful getting some of her insights.

I spoke with one of my best friends who has also just landed her first job as an early childhood teacher so there are a lot of things about Anna that I have 'mined' from her!

What drives Anna?

I think a big part of what drives Anna is the desire to impress Pat. She is at a stage where she is a little bit lost in her life, her mum is sick and she is needing to take care of her. She has taken this job in teaching, which she is telling herself she really wants. When she was a kid Pat helped her, and there is a part of her that is hoping that Pat sets her on the right course again, and she is really wanting Pat to tell her that it is ok, and that she is doing well. I think that this little kid Hurricane also reminds her of a lot herself when she was little that she really wants to help, so there is that connection as well.

Do you have any favourite lines from the play?

There are some definite moments that I really like. It is pretty early so it is all still just settling in with me. But I do like the line about Mrs Lee, who if you asked her to copy and paste something would give you some scissors and some glue, I like this because that came from a story that I told Angela about my mum, that she had had with an older office administrator when she was at school. So I really like that line and that Angela has included it in the play.

Script Excerpt

Anna: You're so burnt out, you can't believe in anyone else's potential, you have to cut them down. Take Hurricane Little, who's actually a really great kid when you put the effort in.

Pat: You think I haven't put the effort in with him?

Anna: I think you've been underestimating him and me since the first day of term. You've been waiting for us to screw up so you can sock it to Thatcher. Guess what, we're three quarters of the way through the year and we haven't yet so....Ha.

Beat

Pat: Beware of hubris.



CHALKFACE TEAM: PHOTO JESS ZENG

CHARACTERS/ROLES

At first glance the characters present as familiar archetypal figures. We have the two main characters that battle against each other, the young energy vs the old worn down teacher. A principal with a sole focus on meeting certain 'KPI's' and balance sheet results over the education and welfare of the students. Office manager Cheryl Filch is the classic 'administration' character with her goal to achieve a positive financial situation for the school no matter how she achieves it, this idea of the 'finance person' as having reduced integrity, underhanded methods and no empathy outside of the financial statements. However we discover there are complexities to the characters as the term goes on. These archetypes begin to soften, particularly with Pat and Anna as they connect with each other and understand they are working toward a common goal.

Pat Novitsky, Mid 50's - teacher

Pat is the most experienced teacher in the play. She has 20 years of experience at West Vale Primary and with young children and teaching. She is knowledgeable and has a deep love for the students however when we meet her she is returning from the summer break having lost a dear friend/colleague. The shock of experiencing no one turn up for the funeral has left her bitter with her fellow teachers. She brings this hurt and anger with her on the first day of term. We initially get the sense that she is burnt out and has lost her love for teaching, and her warmth for the children, however as the play develops it is revealed that this is not the case. Beneath her gruff exterior she has a deep understanding of how children learn, of pedagogy - before the use of the word became popular- and care for the students. This becomes apparent as the relationship between herself and Anna Park, a fresh graduate, grows.

Anna Park, early 20's - graduate teacher

Anna is a freshly graduated teacher. She has a Masters in Neuroplasticity and a reputation for being a 'child whisperer'. She is enthusiastic and optimistic, bringing with her a fresh and unjaded approach believing that 'Every child has incalculable value'.

She believes that this has been lost at West Vale and that an updated approach is needed. Her youth, positivity and desire to make a difference shine a light on the cynical views of Pat, however as we travel further into the play we find that they have more in common than initially presented.



Denise Hart, Mid 40's - teacher

We meet Denise, the music teacher for the kindy students, as she arrives first in the staffroom, giving us a sense of her dedication to the school. However we discover that she has her own agenda for arriving early. She appears to be quiet and spoken over, at various points through the play the other characters speak over Denise, or speak sharply to her.

Pat: Tell Miss Park what Hurricane Little did last year? Stand up straight.

Denise: Well -

Pat: Big loud voice.

Denise: It was a Monday afternoon, mid-term. I was in here, in the staffroom, supervising Hurricane for school detention when he said he saw a rat run into the stationary cupboard. I freaked out, terrified of what Ms Filch would do if the rat chewed up all the coloured paper, so I went in there to investigate. Hurricane locked the door behind me. I screamed for help, but everyone had gone home. I spent the night in there, until Mr Theodopolous our janitor let me out the next morning. I was hysterical by that stage. Trapped in there all night with a rat. It was like room 101 in 1983.

Pat: Four. What else?

Denise: I'm ashamed to say I had to do a little wee on the carpet. So if you notice an odour -

Pat: Thank you Denise. You may sit down now.

Denise sits obediently.

We learn early on that she has spent the summer in a psychiatric ward, indicating that she might be in a fragile state of mind, which helps explain her 'quietness'. We also find that as the play progresses we see moments of Denise trying to speak up.

Douglas Houston, late 40's - Principal

When Douglas arrives in his lycra balancing his bicycle, he projects a certain image of a person who cares about what people think, but it is not the teachers or the students. We soon discover that he is driven by meeting the expectations of the Education Department and other potential corporate interests. His focus is very much on the dollar value of running the school. He refers to the students as 'human capital' and the parents as 'clients'. When bills and money issues come his way he is quick to pass them off to the office manager to 'deal with'. We do also see that he is keen to use the skills of the newly appointed Anna Park, 'child whisperer', for his own personal benefit, to tame his own children. He has very little care for the students at the school, or for his teaching staff. His clear lack of concern for Pat after Sue's death shows us this in the early scenes of the play, where he is quick to encourage Pat to resign in a deal over allocating Hurricane Little.

Steve Budge, 40's - teacher

Steve teaches PE to the students, and appears to have a love for teaching, and the students. This has unfortunately been hampered by an incident involving one of the students, Hurricane Little, which has left him physically injured and mentally scarred.

Steve: Pat, do I have to remind you that it was Hurricane Little who pulled the chair out from under me eighteen months ago. A cruel unthinking act that resulted in twenty-four seven pain, a workers comp claim that's still in limbo and my boyfriend of six years dumping me for an Olympic gymnast. Hurricane Little ruined my life.

We learn that as a result of the accident Steve is now addicted to painkillers and his ability to teach has been impaired. He has some of the bitterness that we hear in Pat but it this is a direct result of the actions of Hurricane. Throughout the play we see Anna influence Steve to make a decision that brings him happiness but also a situation that highlights Douglas's monetary priorities over his staff's wellbeing.

Cheryl Filch, 30's - office manager

Cheryl comes from the banking sector and it is clear that is where she wishes she was. It has been a 'misconduct' charge that has resulted in her appointment at the school. A 'lesser' position for Filch, however the principal Douglas has appointed her for her fiscal acumen, to help manage the financial position of the school.

She worked in the banking sector before the inquiry. Rumour has it she got sacked for "misconduct." She keeps the stationary cupboard under strict lock and key.

She doesn't like the children, or the teachers, and is much happier in an environment that is entirely controllable and filled with numbers and paper shredders. The very idea of young children and their germs repels her. Her underhanded approach in 'dealing' with the financial issues that Douglas passes on to her indicate her lack of concern for the wellbeing of those in the school and the consequences her actions might have.



MICHELLE NY PHOTO: JESS ZENG

Hurricane Little, 8 year old student

Whilst we never meet Hurricane, he is very much present in the play. Pat portrays him as a 'lost cause' listing all the chaos that he has caused, however Anna sees him as a welcome challenge. Much of the play is centred around the behaviour of Hurricane and the results of his actions.

What next?

Think of the relationship between the characters, how were the layers of each character slowly revealed through the writing and performance? Describe some key qualities of each character.

What are some of the key points of tension that the writer has created between the characters? Can you identify the things that are important to the characters? What is it that drives Pat to stay, now that Sue is gone?

Write these points down and note how they might drive the story.



SET DESIGN - PHOTO: JESS ZENG

DESIGN ELEMENTS

AN INTERVIEW WITH AILSA PATERSON
SET & COSTUME DESIGNER

In the weeks preceding the start of rehearsal the Designer presents what is known as a Final Design Presentation. This is a scale model of the set, set within the correct venue, presented to the production department and the company. This is to enable the workshop team to ensure that the build of the set is achievable and will easily be able to fit each of the venues that it tours to. It also provides the education and marketing teams with information regarding the design and the costumes. The process leading to this point involves many conversations with the Director and the Designer as they mine the text and also create the visual world presented in the themes. It needs to represent the storyline of the writer as the Director sees it, including the decay that exists, not only within the structural buildings but also within the education system institutionally and architecturally. See Further Reading for more on this.

Ailsa and Jessica (Arthur - the Director) talked about creating a space that is a playground for teachers, a space that constantly delivers surprises. We are in the one location, the staff room of a public primary school, and need to travel through a number of different scenes in this space. Ailsa has provided a detailed naturalistic world, with peeling paint, worn carpet and potentially flickering fluorescent lights. There are also toilet doors, that are used by the



COSTUME DESIGN - PHOTO: JESS ZENG

cast, along with a stationary cupboard that is entered by a number of the staff. There is action that occurs within this space, creating challenges for the director actors to solve.

How would you describe the set and costume design for the show?

The set design for *Chalkface* depicts West Vale Primary School, somewhere in Australia in 2022. It is a naturalistic room showing a lounge area, table, pigeonholes, toilet doors, a student services window and a kitchenette. The room is drab and aged, there is a clock permanently showing 8:50am, there is a fire alarm, a bulkhead with two air conditioning grates, peeling paint and ageing furniture. There are passive-aggressive clipart signs encouraging staff to wash their own dishes and championing the teaching profession. There is a blackboard.

The costume design shows two key looks for each character. The main look is their 'teaching uniform' and then they each have a handmade costume for Book Week.

What kind of feel or sense are you trying to recreate?

The design is trying to capture a stale atmosphere. It is a space that has not been cared for or updated, it is not the haven it should be for the teachers, it is a liminal zone reflecting the lack of progress in both the teaching environment and the system of education. The paint on the wall is peeling, the furniture is threadbare, the carpet is stained. There is a sense of wear and age. The set relies on very detailed naturalism.

How does the design connect with the themes in the show?

The design reflects the idea that the teaching environment is stale and tired and does not provide creative or individual modes of expression because of the focus on outcomes and the use of a business model. The script references the Chernobyl explosion, and the set was inspired by images of abandoned classrooms and schools in that city. This is a space left to rot, but we see that the new teacher Anna arrives and injects new life into this tired environment, just as nature gradually revitalised the damaged Chernobyl environment. The clock stuck in time and the obvious nods to OH&S such as hand sanitiser, fire extinguishers, fire alarm and safety signs point to the risk adverse focus.

How did you approach the design for this show?

The design emerged from our exploration of real staff rooms in the public education system, along with references from Chernobyl. We focussed on the details of wear such as peeling paint and attempted to portray an atmosphere of claustrophobia in the floor plan and scale of the room. The design has to work for four quite different venues when it tours, so there were very strict parameters in terms of sightlines and touring ability. We wanted to create a playground for the actors, to reflect the idea that they become quite childlike in their interactions and to allow the cast room to discover hiding places within the space.



SET DESIGN AILSA PATERSON PHOTO: JESS ZENG



COSTUME DESIGN - BOOK WEEK

MARTINE MICKLEM PHOTO: ENKEN HAGGE

During the play the teachers come in costume for Book Week, promoting the importance of reading and encouraging students to connect with their reading experiences through creative play dressing up as their favourite characters. We note that the teaching staff have chosen costumes that align with their personalities, with their personal disposition. Particularly Anna.

Anna comes as The Lorax, who famously quotes *'Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's Not'*. This quote from Dr Seuss's famous book *'The Lorax'* refers to the catastrophic effects of climate change, but Angela has included it here, to symbolise that this aspect of our community life is slowly being eroded. Anna is desperate to garner that spirit again. Not just as a message to the students on how to approach life in general but also as a message to the teaching staff and perhaps particularly to Pat. Anna's belief in Pat's genuine desire to inspire and provide opportunity to the young students in her care remains throughout the play, even when Pat maintains her abrasive nature. The beautiful simplicity of this message actually means a great deal and connects beautifully with the themes.

Pat as Miss Trunchbull also symbolises her own character. Miss Trunchbull, from the Roald Dahl novel *'Matilda'*, is a fearsome woman who is known to frighten the life out of pupils and teachers alike, she is notorious for her brutal and indiscriminate punishments. We can see that this external presentation of Pat Novitsky is how she is wishing to be perceived by the students and her colleagues.

Cheryl Filch as Elsa from *Frozen*, again symbolises that she even though she has made the effort to dress up she is not connected to the community of the staffing team. They have an underlying connection through their shared love of teaching and children. *Frozen* is not a book, and thus the point of Book Week is completely missed by Filch.



EA Peterson '22



JESS DUNN: PHOTOS: JESSICA ZENG.

MUSIC & SOUND

AN INTERVIEW WITH JESS DUNN,
COMPOSER & SOUND DESIGNER

How would you describe the sonic world you will create for Chalkface?

The sonic world for *Chalkface* consists of a few different aspects. The first is diegetic sound or sounds that exist inside the world of the play – thunder, rain, sirens and school bells. There are also instruments on stage that are played by the actors – these include recorders and glockenspiels. The final piece is the scene change music and underscoring, which is music/sound that plays underneath the actors’ dialogue.

What kinds of sounds are you using for this play?

The play is set entirely in the staffroom of a primary school and although there is talk of the students, we never see or hear any of them. My aim with the score was for their presence to be felt and also for the scene change music to feel very much a part of the world – so with this in mind I decided to use typical primary school instruments. These include recorders, ukuleles, toy percussion, glockenspiels and xylophones – things that you might hear kids playing if you were wandering through a primary school. Towards the end of the play, I also make use of a primary school choir.



JESSICA ARTHUR AND JESS DUNN: PHOTO: JESS ZENG.

Have you drawn on any particular artists or ideas for the music/sound of the play?

The play is a comedy but it also references themes such as capitalism, climate change, the corporatisation of the education system – at the heart of it is this call to challenge and break these systems. With that in mind, I spent time researching protest music throughout history, as well as punk rock music because of its relationship to politics and it being anti-establishment. It wasn't so much about directly borrowing from these music worlds, but trying to create the energy and feeling they evoke. The other thing that has shaped my conception of the score is some of the things that traditionally work in comedy film scores, such as faster tempos that can keep the momentum of the storytelling going.

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

As a composer, my job is to create the sound world of each particular show. This includes writing original music that aids in the storytelling and enhances or conveys certain emotions. This music may take the form of scene change music, pre and post-show music and underscoring. Working in theatre, you're often taking on the role of both composer and sound designer, however, in most shows there isn't a clear distinction between the two. As a sound designer you're responsible for all sound that exists within the play including microphones for reinforcement of the actors voices, sound effects, sound system design, and any live instruments.

SCRIPT EXCERPT

Douglas enters and Anna pursues him across the staffroom.

Anna: Douglas? Douglas? Douglas?

Douglas: What do you think of the twins?

Anna: Kale and Quinoa?

Douglas: No, my twins. Is it ...

Douglas whispers this...

Douglas: A.D.H.D.

Anna: I'm not a psychologist.

Douglas: You are the child whisperer. Hurricane's parents called last week, to say how delighted they are with his progress.

Anna: I'm really happy to hear that.

Douglas: I knew you'd be a breath of fresh air. You'll have to come over again next weekend, the twins took a real shine to you.

Anna: Did you by any chance take a look at my proposal -

Douglas: Your proposal

Anna: - for the /playground?

Douglas: Playground, yes.

Anna: You've read it?

Douglas: It's on the list.

Anna: How long's the list?

Douglas: Long.

Anna: Could you take a quick look now?

Douglas: I'm afraid I don't have my glasses.

Anna: I'll read it for you.

Douglas: Ms Park, I don't think you realise just how much playgrounds cost.

Pat enters and makes herself a coffee.

Anna: Oh no I do. I've called a few companies, requested some quotes. They're all here in my proposal.

Anna shows Douglas a folder.

Douglas: We're talking between fifty to a hundred thousand -

Anna: More actually for some of the high-end structures. I think we should go with an eco design. This is my pick. It won the natural play space award last year. Creative, safe, whilst encouraging risk which according to some studies reduces under-age drinking and drug use in later life.

Pat: Who knew a simple swing could prevent heroin addiction.

Douglas: I'll stop you there Ms Park. We're a small public school. We can't afford a new playground, let alone the space, maybe in a few -

Anna: I think we can.

Douglas: We can't.

LIGHTING DESIGN

AN INTERVIEW WITH MARK SHELTON

How would you describe the lighting design for Chalkface?

Writing this five weeks out from the opening night I am only just beginning to assemble my ideas for this production. What I know from the script, the first day of rehearsal and the set model, is that it is a comedy set in a highly realistic teachers' staffroom in a rundown and struggling primary school. The style is more satire than farce: fluorescent lighting comes to mind, but with a smidgeon of warmth. As the play reaches its climax there are some dramatic events which will require special attention.

How does the lighting design create/manipulate the mood on stage?

Imagine an empty stage, a guard, a prisoner, and gallows: an impending doom. The first thing we'd want to do is to confine the space and accentuate the mood, so a very strong backlight set off to the side to capture the gallows, its shadow, and our characters approaching. This pool of light is just big enough to contain the action and sets the rest of the stage in darkness. Perhaps we add some low side light, or a touch from the front, to allow the audience to read the characters' faces and physical gestures. Perhaps our backlight is cool and our sidelight warm. Perhaps as the prisoner mounts the stairs and the executioner attends his business the sidelight fades away and the backlight builds to full intensity, until the trapdoors open, the prisoner drops, and we snap our lights to black... and there the image remains, stamped on our audiences' retinæ.

Lighting is one component of the play's narrative journey, it needs to direct the audience's attention, support the dramatic themes, enhance the scenic elements, and move and change with the exact same intent and intensity as the overall production. Good lighting is almost always "invisible" to the audience's conscious mind.

What is the world of this play?

The world of this play is for the most part highly naturalistic, it should therefore feel real and accessible to anyone who has worked in an office or staff room.

How do you hope your design supports the play's ideas/world?

Being a comedy, it is important that the lighting clearly illuminates the characters for the audience, for the most part I would use white light or subtle pastel tones to achieve this. Other sections will require more dramatic, colourful or stylised elements which are still evolving in my mind.

What do you see as the role of a lighting designer in a theatre production?

Primarily it is about visual dramaturgy. Who do we want the audience to be looking

at? What is happening and what can the lighting do to accentuate that moment of stage time? Where are we - gothic manor, the outback, disco, storm - how can the lighting help to convey the sense of place? When are we set; day, night, autumn, winter, summer or spring? How; how do we move from one state to the next, what type of cue structure is best, do we snap from one moment to the next, or slowly fade? After the lighting of the scene, cueing is really important, finding the exact right point to start a cue, and the exact right point to finish it: it is all in the timing, making the play's visual transitions seamless illustrations of the drama unfolding.



What next?

Think of the design process and the set, costume, lighting and sound for this play. Taking into consideration the information above, create a palette for your own design. Gathering images to create a feel for the space, pull these together in a mood board.

How would you create a set to support the story of the play? Discuss the realism in the set and the components that inhabit the stage. How might this present challenges for the team?

How might you change these elements as the play progresses?

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



CLEMENT RUKUNDO AND MICHELLE NY: PHOTO: JESS ZENG.

THEMES & CONCEPTS

IN *CHALKFACE* BY ANGELA BETZIEN

Humanity

We can see that through the play Angela is constantly bringing us back to human moments. Despite the appearance of a disconnected staff room we can find that underneath it all there is still a sense that the teaching staff have the needs of the children as a focus. Not only the students, but also each other. Anna Park arrives with energy and optimism that is challenged by the ascerbic wit of Pat initially, but this is just Pat's residual hurt after the death of her closest friend. Pat is wishing to push Anna to her best, for reasons that become apparent as the play goes on. Denise is another example of someone who the team appears to overlook and belittle, however we find examples through the text where the staff do look after her. As Douglas gathers information on each of his teachers to hold against them, Pat advises Denise to hold things close to her chest, to protect her position. As the play reaches its conclusion there is a scene where the teachers come together instinctively and without question. Anna abandons her classroom and Denise and Pat step in immediately to cover and look after both Anna and the students. Angela has linked the theme of humanity through various moments of the play, whether the characters are searching for it or in explicit interactions between the staffing team. Whilst the play has a comedic style there is a lot of humanity between the interactions of the characters.

As we spend more time in the staff room we feel a bond between the teachers. Denise and Steve have a friendship that is felt through their interactions and at the climax of the play Denise reaches out to Filch, who has been unreachable and clearly separate from the teaching staff, but who has also been dealing with her own financial difficulties. Denise reaches out with a very kind and beautiful gesture to Filch. Douglas also explains to Pat that he tried to get to Sue's funeral, and opens up about confidences that Sue had shared with him. It is a rare gentle moment for Douglas. We see that in extreme stress situations, as the one presented in the climax of the play, as humans we still come together, despite the struggles we have making our way through the world.

Community

Angela has spoken about the idea of community, about finding places where community exists and creating a play that highlights this. She was drawn to the school community as one that is accessible to everyone. We all have some lived experience with this, either as a student, as a parent with students in schooling or as a teacher or friend/relative of someone in the teaching profession. We all know someone who lives in the world of teaching.

Teachers have a particular experience, a defined language and understanding of the pressures they each face. They are a community that has to deal with children, parents of children, school administrators, school principals and an overarching system that has yet to fully realise the value in teaching.

Despite the initial perception of dysfunction and separation we are given glimpses into the social community. Education systems have traditionally operated by separating - into primary and secondary, different subjects, advanced and basic, private and public but in this staffroom at West Vale we are invited to observe a shared language and understanding of the limitations and expectations within the school community.

Douglas: What's that thing you teachers say?

Pat: I didn't realise it was Friday?

Douglas: No...

Pat: I teach for the money?

Douglas: No that's not it...

Pat: I can't wait to do lesson plans all weekend?

Douglas: No...

Anna: I fall asleep so easily the night before school starts?

Douglas claps out the rhythm with his hands.

Denise joins in.

Douglas: You get what you get, and you don't get upset.

Generational battle/Ageism

As we return to the West Vale Primary School staff room we immediately meet Pat, who has spent 25 years teaching. The wisdom and experience of those years has also brought with it a level of disillusionment. She has experienced all nature of students, has pioneered a literacy program in the 80's, received a teacher of the year award for her work with disadvantaged students and campaigned for systemic inequalities in education. She has also dealt with students that don't fit in the box, that challenge the system and require much more information. Students

like Hurricane Little, who challenges everyone with his behaviour.

Pat: For many of these kids just teaching them to blow their nose and leave their private parts alone is a monumental achievement.

Anna: West Vale has a high proportion of resource intensive students -

Pat: One way of putting it.

Anna: How would you/ put it?

Pat: We have a lot of little shits.

When Anna Park arrives, a 'coup' for West Vale with a reputation as a child whisperer but very little classroom experience, Pat is taken back to her memory of dealing with Anna as that same child that didn't fit in a prescribed 'box'. Her postgraduate degree in Neuroplasticity and child behaviour provides her with a confident and fresh approach to dealing with the 'resource intensive students', that remind her of her schooling.

The cynicism that exists between the two main characters is also fuelled by an underlying knowledge that they share of each other. Pat believes that at 22 years old, Anna is an 'infant' and is seemingly waiting for her to fall on her face. Anna's offer to take Hurricane Little off Pat's hands is genuine but Pat refuses the offer. Is this because she is trying to save Anna from the trouble of Hurricane or a clear message that she does not believe Anna has the capacity to manage him?

Anna: I'm not easily intimidated. In fact, I welcome the challenge. It sounds like Hurricane's behaviour is attention seeking, an acquired strategy to divert focus away from his insecurities around learning.

Pat: There's no insecurity around learning. He's as sharp as a tack. In fact, he's so smart, he's dangerous.

Anna: So perhaps he needs to be placed in an accelerated learning program. Perhaps he's just bored.

Pat: You can diagnose his behaviour until the bell goes. It won't change the fact Hurricane is high risk. So enough grand gestures Ms Park.

Whilst this tension between the experience of Pat and the fresh energy and pedagogical approach of Anna is present throughout the play we can feel as the play progresses that there is a respect for one another. Anna's history with Pat also provides us with an extra insight into their relationship. The archetypal 'grumpy old teacher' and 'young enthusiastic graduate' characters start to change and we feel them coming together.

We also see that Douglas displays ageist behaviour toward Pat, encouraging her to retire, and continually espousing the benefits of younger Anna. He appears to have bullied the much more experienced and older teacher Sue out of her job, with claims from Pat that she was forced to retire because of Douglas. The financial benefit of replacing an experienced teacher with a fresh graduate also underlies Douglas's ageist behaviour.

Educational Structure/Pedagogy

Whilst the play does not directly provide a critical commentary on the state of the education system today there is an understanding that the failings of the system are present, through the set, the characters demeanour and their behaviour.

We are in a public government funded school, with signs of neglect and underfunding present. The set is falling apart, we have a blackboard in the room, no signs of technology and maintenance that has been ignored for a number of years. We have a school that does not have a playground, which we know from many years of research is essential to encourage child-directed play.

The focus of Principal Douglas and Cheryl Filch is on a fiscally responsible institution rather than adopting strong pedagogical values and fostering a nurturing environment that enables student centred schooling. When this is done we encourage students to become self directed learners, take risks and engaged participants.

Of particular relevance to the play is the lack of maintenance and upkeep that has been required to keep the school up to standard.

Douglas: Request to fix the bubblers under H block. Taps in the K-3 boy's toilet. Wiring in the library. Faulty urn, leaking flue heaters.

Pat: There's six of those. All marked urgent.

Douglas: Those reports just kept coming and coming.

Anna: So you shredded them.

Douglas: I handballed them to Filch.

Filch: You said and I quote, make them go away.

Douglas: I meant, deal with them. Not destroy them.

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? Identify other methods the director employs to deliver the themes?

How do the extra characters help us to understand the themes of the play?

Discuss how the set helps us identify the themes in the play.



CATHERINE MCCLEMENTS: PHOTO: JESS ZENG.

INTERESTING READING

CHERNOBYL

In writing the play Angela has woven a faint thread of Chernobyl throughout. The gradual decay and decline of place, policies and people as the play progresses. We see from the beginning that the staffroom is a neglected space - highlighting that the teaching staff are not valued. Their space for release, rest and restoration is a chaotic, messy, dilapidated and overlooked area. The school grounds have no playground, an essential in an early learning environment. The basics of an education system, to inspire and develop a love of learning, are barely met. Relationships dissolve between all the characters as we strip away their layers and motivations. As we reach the climax of the play Anna states:

Have you seen those images of abandoned schools in Chernobyl? Deer wander the empty corridors, birds nest in old atlases, rabbits burrow in desks. No sign of us. Do you think this school is going to end up like that, a thousand years from now? Is that where we're headed? Armageddon. Apocalypse. The end of the world.

There is a sense of abandonment of the children that they are supposed to be teaching. Underneath all of the testing and KPI's there are still young children and we get this thread that maybe we are leaving them to grow in the wilderness as well.

CHALLENGING EDUCATION SYSTEMS

Angela talks about the education system in her interview and how we are in crisis at the moment. We have seen an increase in 'measuring' success, the introduction of testing and scaling to identify schools that are producing 'successful' students. Reducing our schooling and education systems to a corporate affair undermines all that education is designed to do.

Alongside this trend toward 'corporatisation' there is also increasing research that highlight the importance of play, the significance of risk taking and the essential learned skill of resilience. Play-based learning motivates young children, they are naturally predisposed to play and the idea that a school is not properly resourced to have a playground highlights the state that some of our public schools face.

Angela has created characters that are actively opposed to each other in Anna, who cannot understand how this cannot be an essential, and Douglas, who is busy managing dollars. Surely a playground is an early childhood education, in a public funded school is a no-brainer!

<https://www.acer.org/au/discover/article/the-big-five-challenges-in-education-six-years-on-a-special-webinar-series>

The above link discusses five challenges in education:

- Raising the status of the teaching profession
- Reducing disparities between Australian schools
- Getting all children off to a good start

Reducing the 'long tail' of underachievement
Designing a 21st century curriculum

Chalkface is a comedy but underneath it all Angela is posing some questions regarding the current state of education within Australia.

PERFORMING COMEDY

Hopefully at the end of the play you will have laughed. Angela has written a black comedy, which is quite different from her normal style, and with that comes quite a challenge. Performing comedy is a very difficult task and requires a great understanding of the script,

“Comedy” from the Greek work ‘komos’ meaning ‘village revel’, or ‘big fat party where everyone falls about laughing at your gags, schtick, funny walks, voices, your inherent cruelty to others and most peoples’ general ignorance of themselves and the world around them’

“The best way to play comedy is a little more seriously than drama”
- Lee Strasbourg.

One of the best sources of comedy is reality, and Angela has written about the reality of education and the life of a teacher away from the students. Comedy is not accidental, it is very specific and structured. Timing and precision are the key points to master to play comedy. If your timing is out, you will lose the moment and hence the laughs.

As with drama, the analysis of the script is the starting point for a comedic actor, to get a tone of the play overall, finding moments that are explicitly comedic and those that are creating a particular moment in the play/story as a whole. Finding character for a comedy is the same as in for drama. The rules are still the same, mining the script and looking for given circumstances of your character.

In *Chalkface*, Jessica Arthur is also using the set to create moments, and challenges for the actors. It contains several contained zones where action happens and this adds an extra layer to the comedy, for example going in and out of the stationery cupboard.

There are many resources and articles available on learning the art of comedy but the book *Comedy Rules: From the Cambridge Footlights to Yes Prime Minister* by Jonathan Lynn is an excellent resource. (Artistic Director Mitchell Butel’s recommendation).

SCRIPT EXCERPTS:

Denise: Still, coming to the school and murdering you in Term 3 seems like a lot of effort when Fritz'll have a new teacher next year.

Steve: My life's over anyway. I found this in my pigeon hole this morning. It's a letter rejecting my claim for compensation.

Anna: On what basis?

Steve: They say I've fraudulently claimed incapacity. I've been summoned to appear in court.

Anna: What proof?

Steve: Beats me. I'm crippled except for one joyful hour on a Thursday night when I'm wearing point shoes and a sequined tutu. I'm so in the moment I forget all about the pain.

Anna: What did I say?

Denise has another Braxton Hicks.

Steve: What was that?

Denise: Braxton Hicks.

Steve: I taught a Braxton Hicks. No, that was Brandy Sacks.

*Another massive strike of thunder.
The lights flicker on and off and then come back on again.*

PA: This is a shelter in place lockdown. An incident is occurring at or near the school. Emergency services are attending. Remain in your secure locations until further directions by Staff or Police. This is not a drill.

Pat enters.

Pat: Steve, where's your class?

Steve: They're with Ming watching a documentary on Peacock Spiders.

Anna: Did you find Hurricane?

Pat: He's not on the library roof.

Denise: That's a good sign. Unless...Did you check the handball court?

CHALKFACE

by Angela Betzien
July 1st 2022

This play was commissioned by Sydney Theatre Company and further supported by the
Copyright Agency.

FURTHER ACTIVITIES

WRITTEN RESPONSE

Write a review of this production of *Chalkface*, focus on the comedy moments and how the actors make these work. Reference the set, sound and lighting design, direction, and audience response.

For guidelines on how to write a review, see our review writing resource linked in the dropdown menu for *Chalkface* at statetheatrecompany.com.au/education-program

WRITTEN RESPONSE & ACTIVITY

Humour is used throughout the play. Discuss the intention of this humour and how it works. Discuss the contrasting roles of Anna and Pat. What qualities do you like/dislike in each and how do their roles fit in our perception of teachers.

DISCUSSION

As a class, discuss influential teachers you have had in the past. What was it that inspired you?

Think of the current educational system - is it geared toward creating opportunities for students? Or is it embedded in institutional and structural bureaucracy?

What should the government be doing to improve our education system?

ACTIVITY

What were the moments in the play that made you laugh? Discuss the naturalistic design of the set and the acting contributed to those moments.

Recreate the scenes without the set and analyse whether this works and if not how could you make it work?

What choices could you make to ensure that the element of comedy remains without the set?

