

**STATE THEATRE**  
COMPANY SOUTH AUSTRALIA



**HOUSE *WORK***

**BY EMILY STEEL**

**7 - 22 FEBRUARY**

**DUNSTAN PLAYHOUSE**

**STUDY GUIDE**

# HOUSEWORK

BY EMILY STEEL

## SYNOPSIS

Kelly Sheppard, a naive but optimistic and excited junior staffer in the Electorate Office of Ruth Mandour, a first-term Member of Parliament, unexpectedly gets the chance to travel to Canberra with the passionate MP she idolises and Ruth's brilliant but exhausted Chief of Staff, Anna Cooper. Anna is juggling Ruth's new policy launch, a husband who can't deal with their daughter in her absence and the type of coffee the Member requires while Kelly's over the moon to get behind the scenes at Parliament and watch her hero in action. But getting what you want in the nation's capital requires some fancy footwork and careful navigation of morals and personal ambition. What they all experience that week makes them question their ambitions, ideals and the value of democracy itself.

## EXPLORE

Look out for these icons to learn more.



Activity



Reading



Video

DUNSTAN PLAYHOUSE

7 — 22 February 2025

SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

13 February 11am

RUNNING TIME

Approximately 130 minutes  
including interval.

Ages 15+, Year 10 - 12

Contains some coarse language and  
adult themes.

Please see the 'What to Expect'

notes for more detail on content.

Note that this is a new work and  
changes may be made to the script  
and staging of the work.

Resource created by Fiona Lukac for  
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from the State Theatre Company  
South Australia State Educate Circle.

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Emily Taheny  
(left) and Sunitra  
Martinelli (right) in  
rehearsals:  
Photo Matt Byrne



# CAST & CREATIVE TEAM

**KELLY/MIM** ..... Franca LaFosse  
**THE PM/CLEANER/WAITRESS** ..... Sunitra Martinelli  
**PAUL/LEAD PROTESTOR** ..... Renato Musolino  
**ANNA/SARAH** ..... Emily Taheny  
**BEN/DUNCAN/SPEAKER** ..... Benn Welford  
**RUTH/JOURNALIST** ..... Susie Youssef

**WRITER** ..... Emily Steel  
**DIRECTOR** ..... Shannon Rush  
**DESIGNER** ..... Ailsa Paterson  
**LIGHTING DESIGNER** ..... Nigel Levings  
**COMPOSER/SOUND DESIGNER** ..... Andrew Howard  
**DRAMATURG** ..... Tahli Corin  
**ASSISTANT DIRECTOR** ..... James Watson  
**PRODUCTION MANAGER** ..... Gabrielle Hornhardt  
**STAGE MANAGER** ..... Isabella Strada  
**ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER** ..... Ashlee Scott

Set made by State Theatre Company South Australia Workshop.

Costumes made by State Theatre Company South Australia Wardrobe.

# MEET THE WRITER

## EMILY STEEL

Emily Steel is an award-winning playwright and emerging screenwriter.

Her stage plays include the AWGIE Award-winning *Euphoria*, produced by State Theatre Company SA and Country Arts SA and researched in regional communities, *19 Weeks*, which won the Jill Blewett Playwright's Award, Best Theatre Award at the Adelaide Fringe and Audio AWGIE for her adaptation for BBC Radio 4, *The Garden* and *How Not To Make It In America* for independent SA company Theatre Republic, and *Impersonal Space*, developed with autistic ensemble Company AT and performed in the DreamBIG children's festival. Her new play, *Housework*, was developed with the support of a residency with the Assemblage Centre for Creative Arts at Flinders University.

She was selected for the 2024 SBS Emerging Writers' Incubator and spent the last year working with JOY Studios (fka KOJO Originals) as their Development Associate. She directed and produced a filmed version of *19 Weeks*, screened by Assemblage and UC San Diego and since used as part of university courses in genetic counselling and midwifery. She came up with the original concept and was a core writer for the Ruby Award-winning *Decameron 2.0*, produced by STCSA and ActNow Theatre, which put 100 new monologues on YouTube during the 2020 lockdown. She has participated in the Adelaide Film Festival Expand Lab, AFTRS Talent Camp at the South Australian Film Corporation, Spark TV writing workshop and AiF Untapped masterclasses.

Emily is originally from Wales and now lives in Adelaide with her partner, two kids and a relentlessly sociable dog.



Photo Matt Byrne.

# AN INTERVIEW WITH EMILY STEEL

## WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO WRITE THE PLAY?

Initially, Julia Gillard. Her experiences as Australia's first female PM and the way she was portrayed in the media. I read a lot of articles and books about her and Kevin Rudd and started writing a play based on real events, but it wasn't working. There are ethical considerations in writing about real, identifiable people, and I felt tied in knots trying to put words in their mouths. So I rethought it and started again, approaching it like I've approached previous plays where I research by talking to a lot of different people and then I tell a fictional story, with fictional characters, inspired by that research. Which was lucky because, as it turned out, Joanna Murray-Smith had the Julia Gillard ground covered! (You might ask her if she felt tied in knots.)

## HAVE YOU OBSERVED REAL LIFE COMPARISONS MORE ACUTELY SINCE YOU STARTED WRITING?

In politics or in general? Writing this play or writing at all? I think observing people was what made me start writing in the first place. People are fascinating and heartbreaking and absurd. But audience members will probably make comparisons I never intended or imagined - if anyone in *Housework* reminds you of a specific politician, I probably wasn't thinking of them. Unnervingly, real life events sometimes seem to mimic what's in a play after I've already written it, but that just goes to show that reality isn't very original.

## WHAT THEMES DID YOU INTEND TO ADDRESS? WHAT OTHER THEMES PRESENTED THEMSELVES IN THE WRITING?

While I was researching *Housework*, the story of what happened to Brittany Higgins hit the media. State and Federal parliaments commissioned in-depth reports into sexual harassment and bullying in their workplaces.

So when I talked to people in Adelaide and in Canberra about being a woman working in politics, I expected that stuff to come up. I'm not saying it didn't, but it wasn't the main topic of conversation. What I was really struck by was the difficulty of working in politics while being a mother to a young child. I have young kids of my own and I find when I'm writing a play that I need to place something at the centre of the story that really resonates with me, emotionally. That was it.

## DO YOU HAVE HOPE FOR OUR POLITICAL LANDSCAPE IN THE FUTURE?

Ha! You know Australian politics isn't that bad, in comparison? That, here, the right and left are mostly clustered around the centre? That Afghanistan is now run by the Taliban, the Chinese Communist Party censors the internet (at least they stopped the forced abortions), and Donald Trump has been elected US President for a second time?

So could things here be better? Yes. Could they be much, much worse? Also yes.

## HOW DO YOU FIND THE COMEDY WITH A PLAY THAT ADDRESSES SOME PRETTY BIG ISSUES, POWER, GENDER IMBALANCE, AND POSSIBLE SEXUAL CONFUSION?

How can I not? It's a play. People pay money for tickets and give us two hours of their life. If they wanted to have a miserable time worrying about all the terrible things in the world they could just stay home and read the news.

## WHAT DO YOU HOPE AUDIENCES TAKE AWAY?

I hope they all have different opinions about what happened and what should have happened. I hope they have arguments in the bar afterwards.

# WRITERS NOTE FROM EMILY STEEL

Okay, let's get this out of the way. I am not going to tell you who I talked with, and I am not going to tell you exactly what they said, because a) I promised I wouldn't, which is why they were able to tell me things and b) where's the fun in that? This way, you can try and guess—and you'll probably be wrong, which is fun for me.

In the research for *Housework*, I talked with politicians, political staff and parliamentary staff in both State and Federal parliaments. I read a bunch of books. I absorbed the new in all the usual ways. And then I tumbled it around in the washing machine of my brain, on too high a temperature, until the colours ran and it went out of shape, and then I wrote the play.

*Housework* is a fiction. The events are not real and the people are not real. There will probably be elements that make you think of real events and real people, and some of that is because I'm trying to use a story to look at the kind of things that happen in the world, and some of it is accidental but I'll pretend it was on purpose if it makes me look clever. (There are almost certainly things I messed up—if you spot any, please tell me quietly so I can keep up the pretence.)

Huge thanks to everyone who was generous enough to talk with me. Thanks to the Assemblage Centre for Creative Arts at Flinders University, who supported the research—to the extent that they helped me take my family with me to Canberra because I was breastfeeding and couldn't go otherwise—how's that for genuinely exploring the barriers between women and power? Thanks to Mitchell, for commissioning this in the first place and then bearing with me when it became a completely different play to the one originally pitched, and to everyone at State Theatre Company South Australia, who have taken what I put on the page and transformed it into the show you're watching tonight. Thanks to Shannon and Tahli, whose feedback on drafts of the script made it better. Thanks to the excellent cast, for bringing all these characters and words to life. If I thank everyone I want to, you'll be reading all night, so I'll stop—after saying thanks to Chris, Frank and Ivor, who continue to put up with me and all the weirdness I call work.

I hope you enjoy the show, and if you find yourselves arguing about it in the bar afterwards, I will be delighted.



Top: Susie Youssef.  
Middle: Benn Welford  
Bottom: Parliament House.

# SCRIPT EXCERPT

This is the one day per week in the twenty-odd weeks of the year when Parliament sits that Ruth (MP), Anna (Chief of Staff) and Ben (Media Advisor) are here—they fly home from Canberra on Thursday night and back again on Sunday. Kelly (Junior Staffer) is here all week, answering phones, dealing with constituents, keeping an eye on local news and maintaining Ruth's Facebook and Twitter. Anna works at her desk. She's very well put together—trouser suits, subtle colours, good hair. Her eyes are fixed on her screen. Kelly enters, quietly. Kelly still dresses like a student. She waits for Anna to acknowledge her presence. Anna doesn't.

KELLY: Um

Beat. Anna?

ANNA: (Without looking up) Yep.

KELLY: You busy?

ANNA: yep

KELLY: Okay.

Kelly backs out like she was never there. As she turns to leave:

ANNA: (Still not looking at her) Kelly.

KELLY: Yes?

ANNA: What d'you need?

KELLY: Oh, you're busy.

ANNA: I know that, what d'you need?

KELLY: Um..

Anna stops working, raises her eyes and looks at Kelly.

I've got an old man on the phone about his bins.

ANNA: (Dropping her eyes again) We don't do bins.

KELLY: I know but—

ANNA: Council does bins

KELLY: YeahI/know

Anna: give him the number for the/Council



Top: Franca La Fosse.  
Bottom: Costume in rehearsal

# DIRECTOR'S NOTE FROM SHANNON RUSH

For many years now I've admired Emily Steel's raw and insightful writing, quietly fangirling and hoping one day I'd get a chance to work on one of her plays! So when I was asked to direct *HOUSEWORK* I was beyond excited. With just the first scene and a synopsis in hand at the time, I remember being electrified as I read, confirming this would be another exceptional work from a leading South Australian playwright.

Emily's unique ability to illuminate the macro through the micro shines in this play. Her characters are incredibly authentic, their voices powerful and resonant. The intricate detail and specificity of their relationships and circumstances allow the broader themes of the work to emerge organically. Central to the play is its exploration of profound gender inequalities in the political landscape, exposing the double standards and pressures faced by women—including the sacrifices sometimes made in balancing family and career—within a system often designed by and for men. The play challenges us to confront the intricacies of moral decision-making, exploring the complex (yet juicy!) grey areas between right and wrong. It prompts us to reflect on manipulation, agency and power in a potentially unequal democratic system.

Our four-week rehearsal process was intense in the best of ways, full of rich and robust discussion, along with plenty of laughter—a testament to Emily's sharp comedic writing, which extends beyond the dramatic. We hope this season inspires dialogue and debate, recognising that *HOUSEWORK* doesn't provide all the answers, but rather poses some scintillating ethical questions about Parliament, politics, and patriarchy.





Shannon Rush. Photo Matt Byrne

## AN INTERVIEW WITH SHANNON RUSH

 **WATCH**



### QUESTIONS ASKED INCLUDE:

\  
about politics?

Can you talk to the role of the 'cleaner' in the play? What does this character symbolise and how have you used it as a theatrical device?

What have you enjoyed and found interesting about the play?

What do you hope the audience takes away from the play?

# DRAMATIC NOTES

## NATURALISM

This play is a fast-paced, naturalistic work grounded in realism in its acting style, with heightened characterisations for the “other side” characters. It is a politically charged piece with a strong message, infused with humour. Driven by character and narrative, the play delves into the behind-the-scenes workings of the political world and the relationships that form, and fracture.

## BLACK COMEDY

Comedy is woven throughout, not in a caricatured way but with sharp, satirical wit. The play maintains a dynamic and brisk energy, evoking the style of works like *Veep*, *Utopia*, and *The Thick of It*.

## SYMBOLISM

There is symbolism connecting the title of the play ‘Housework’ and the role of the cleaner. This role is quietly present in many scenes, picking up and creating order for the main players around her, continuing to do the work through change and chaos around her.

## THEATRICAL DEVICE

Shannon has discussed using the role of the cleaner as a theatrical device throughout the play.

Constantly in the role of cleaning up the mess that is left within the world of politics. Whilst the cleaner does not have a huge speaking role she is an integral part of what the play is discussing.

## TIMELINE

The action of the play takes place within a week, we travel in a linear timeline from Ruth’s office to Canberra. We are in a fast moving world where the state of things in the morning may very well not be the same as in the afternoon. Allegiances are constantly shifting and by the end of the play we get a sense that a great deal is about to change.

## PERSPECTIVE

We also switch to the perspective of the ‘other side’, during the same time period.

Sarah (opposition MP) and Mim (Sarah’s junior) speak with Duncan (media advisor) about how best to exploit the rumours that they have heard regarding the Minister and the junior staffer.



# CONTEXT

## AUSTRALIAN POLITICAL CLIMATE - CURRENT DAY

Emily Steel has written a play which looks at the world of politics through the lens of a new MP and her team, consisting of her seasoned Chief of Staff, Anna, and a young enthusiastic but very fresh junior staffer, Kelly. Her media policy advisor Ben is an experienced and ambitious member of the team.

In writing this work Emily spent time in Canberra observing the inner workings. If we examine the current political climate in terms of the themes presented in this work, Power, Abuse of power, gender politics, we can make a number of observations.

The pathway to power for women in politics has never been easy, and it doesn't get easier once elected. The prevalent discrimination, gender deafness, sexism and overt abuse not only force women to abandon their leadership aspirations, but also act as signals that discourage young women from corridors of power. Women appear to be less represented than men in traditional pathways into politics, like political groups or meetings during high school or tertiary study.

Conversations about women in politics and life in Canberra are ongoing and have been for many years.

Kate Ellis, a former MP discusses the ongoing problem with gender imbalance and sexism in politics in her book *Sex, Lies and Question Time*.

There is an excellent *Australian Story* looking at the experience of women, across political parties, in Canberra and as politicians in a male dominated world.

## WATCH HERE



Australian society and, more specifically, Australian political culture, is a product of its history and context. Holland and Wright (2017) have noted that Australia's self-image is built on a tradition of gender and racial difference, sexism and misogyny. Intertwined narratives around mateship, the ANZAC tradition and notions of the 'larrikin' and the 'ocker' all celebrate working class, masculine qualities, which over the 20th Century, became representative of everyday Australians.

Sexism within the walls of Parliament has recently been in the spotlight with cases like Brittany Higgins paving the way for many women to step forward. It is this climate in which we should watch the play and ask questions about who holds the power.



# SCRIPT EXCERPT

ANNA: You'll talk about health inequality, we're keeping it broad at this point, touching on funding for public health, Aboriginal health, health in regional and remote communities as well as women's health—get it in Hansard, bring it to the front of the government's mind, don't alienate the men.

RUTH: I won't. I won't say "feminist".

ANNA: We've got Cathy seconding, then Eliza will speak.

RUTH: They're just backbenchers though.

ANNA: Well walk before you can run.

RUTH: I'm trying. How's the face?

ANNA: Good. Smile?  
Ruth grimaces.

ANNA: Bit of lippy on your teeth.

RUTH: Oh, shit.  
She cleans it off with her finger.

ANNA: Still there.  
Ruth tries a tissue. Anna returns to her list.

ANNA: Government business, you'll be called on to vote.

RUTH: We know which way?

ANNA: Got your list here.

RUTH: I'm okay when it's party lines, but if they dress it up as a conscience vote...

ANNA: And then we'll grab you a quick lunch before Question Time.

RUTH: What'll they have for us today, d'you think?

ANNA: Well the PM wore a coat on the weekend so... half an hour on that. And then whether or not the Education Minister is a hypocrite for sending his kids to private school.



## WHAT NEXT?

*These can be used for individual reflection or as class exercises.*

Emily Steel's play *Housework* looks at current day events, after conducting a great deal of written and oral research.

Research the number of women in either of the main political parties and create a chart comparing numbers of female ministers?

Evaluate the impact of these findings on young, politically minded people. Do you think this encourages women to move into politics?

What challenges does this pose to a young staffer such as Kelly?



The cast of Housework. Photo JoAnna Robinson



## THE CAST Q&A

Sunitra Martinelli, Renato Musolino, Benn Welford, Franca LaFosse, Emily Taheny and Susie Youssef answered questions about their roles in Housework:

### FRANCA AND BENN



### EMILY AND SUSIE



### SUNITRA AND RENATO



# SCRIPT EXCERPT

KELLY: This office is so tiny! Ruth, so flat white.

RUTH: Thank you.

KELLY: Anna, double espresso. It's like, you come into this massive building carved out of a hill, and there's a fountain and it's all so grand and then you get back here and your office is a cupboard. She's delighted by this. Ruth is less impressed by her assessment.

RUTH: At least you've smartened up a bit this morning, Kelly.

KELLY: Oh. Thanks. Anna...

ANNA: I made a few suggestions.

RUTH: It's about time, really. Because people will judge me, you know, on what they see of you.

KELLY: I know.

RUTH: You might not like it, having to do your hair and put a bit of makeup on. You might say, why do we have to make so much effort when the men can wear the same suit for a week? But that's the way it is. Isn't it, Anna?



# CHARACTERS/ROLES

## RUTH MANDOUR (MP)

Ruth is a first term government MP who was hand picked to run for her seat. She was a nurse, specialising in children before moving into politics. She is in her 40's and has a grown family, having had children at a younger age. This has enabled her to be in the position to focus on her career now.

Ruth has strong ideals and goals and a certain level of naivete in her ambition. She is very solutions focussed, and is keen to make change. She likes to see action. This could be a result of her experience as a nurse where she was potentially in a position of power and was able to action decisions.

As we get further into the play we get the sense that Ruth is frustrated at the lack of input she appears to have, for example only receiving her speeches just before she is to deliver them.

Ruth was a nurse who became a politician, and throughout the play we see her transition to a politician who used to be a nurse.

## ANNA

Anna is Ruth's chief of staff. She has many years of experience, and has recently returned after taking time out to look after her young daughter, Lucy. She has chosen to work for first

time MP Ruth Mandour and has left her partner Tim to take on the role stay at home parent.

She was once close to becoming an MP herself before being overlooked due to rumours that circulated about her personal life. "I watched my dreams die... and then I kept going".

Anna has a strong party loyalty and understands the implications of the smallest indiscretion or rumour. She is able to see the bigger long term picture and tries to protect those around her.

She has a history with Paul, the Minister for Science and the Environment which has residual impact on the action of the play.

## KELLY

Kelly is in her early 20's, an enthusiastic junior staffer, new to politics and still very optimistic and driven by the goal of 'doing good'. She is loyal to Ruth, and admires her ideology. She is not as polished as those around her, Anna has to lend her clothes to wear to enter Parliament, and her eagerness and excitement is obvious.

During the play Kelly makes a decision that has a big impact, on herself and on the office of Ruth. She lacks the awareness of the fallout of her actions and others try to take advantage of this situation.



## BEN

Ben is the media advisor in Ruth Mandour's office. He is in his 30's and has been in politics longer than Kelly but not as long as Anna. He is very ambitious and charming. He is also interested in his own rise, loyal to the party but willing to throw others under the bus to progress his own career.

We can see that he is uninterested in Kelly until she proves to be useful for his own agenda. Ben is also quite ruthless.

## PAUL

Paul is the Minister for Science and Environment, in his 50's and quite likeable. The script tells us that he is charming, and that Kelly studied him during his activist years. He has originally come into politics with strong ideals and a social conscience. He has public support, indicated by the implication that he may be in line for the prime ministership.

He is married with children, with his wife undergoing serious health concerns, a matter he has discussed publicly, perhaps to garner public support. Despite this he also appears to be charming, perhaps uncomfortably so, and has a history of inappropriate relationships.

As a man, who has been in politics for a significant period of time he is in an elevated position of power.

## PM

The female Prime Minister is a very considered character and whilst does not appear consistently throughout the play her meeting with Anna and Ruth is significant.

The PM has had to work hard and is very strategic. She meets with Ruth and Anna to discuss the situation that has arisen. It is clear that she has a solution and that there is little negotiation on how it should be handled.

## SARAH

Sarah Peterson is in opposition, similar role and age to Anna. As a member of the opposition her drive is to find ways to pull the government down. She is ruthless and ambitious.

She lacks empathy for the situation of the Minister for Science and the Environment and brings this up in Question Time. She plays with his emotions in an attempt to unsettle him as they uncover more about the infidelity.

## MIM

Mim is an ambitious and confident young junior staffer. She works with Sarah and has an agenda to disrupt and stir up media interest in the personal rumours that are circling around Kelly and Paul. Her aim is to capitalise on the personal issues of a situation involving a potentially vulnerable young woman.

Like Sarah her goal is short term and she acts out of personal ambition.

## DUNCAN

Duncan is the opposition media advisor, in the opposite role to Ben. He is very ruthless, incredibly sharp and intelligent and very strategic. He assesses situations quickly and without any warmth. He is clearly driven by the goals of the party - to gain power and his interactions with each of the characters tells us that he will do whatever it takes to reach that goal.

## OTHERS:

Cleaner, doubles with the PM

Protestors double with Paul, Ben and the PM

Speaker doubles with Ben

Waitress doubles with the PM

Jackie Powell, journalist doubles with Ruth



## WHAT NEXT?

Pick one of the characters and underline their objectives and journey throughout the play.

Do some of these objectives conflict? If so, where?

Look at the character of Anna, and also of Kelly. List their goals and objectives and note what level of power each character has, if any.

What does 'dressing appropriately' mean? Is this different for men and women? Why do you think this still exists today?

# SCRIPT EXCERPT

BEN: I can't. I've got the conference with Ruth.

ANNA: She wants me to go now.

BEN: But you've got so much to do.

ANNA: I know.

BEN: And you've got to get Lucy from school.

ANNA: D'you know what she said?

BEN: Ruth?

ANNA: No, Lucy. I have to pick her up today or her Year One teacher won't believe I exist.

BEN: Oh that's not fair, is it?

ANNA: Imagine all the dads that have never done pick up and everyone believes they exist.

BEN: You get Lucy. I'll do the conference.

ANNA: No I've texted Tim now.

BEN: I'll just have a power nap in the meeting room.

ANNA: You can't. Ruth's going to be in there with a playwright.

BEN: Why?

ANNA: Go home. I'm almost done with the speech.

BEN: Don't let her change a word.

ANNA: She will barely have time to read it through.





# PRODUCTION TEAM

STAGE MANAGER ISABELLA STRADA

ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER ASHLEE SCOTT

## WATCH

Click here to watch our interview with ASM Ashlee Scott.



Act	Scene	Page	Element	Quantity	Character	Script Information	Notes	Dept	Final
1	1	3	Vacuum	1	Cleaner	Cleaner Vacuums as audience enters	Needs to be backpack style and work - will buy one from bunnings.	props	x
1	1	3	Bag of rubbish	1	Cleaner			props	x
1	1	3	Anna Laptop	1	Anna		Needs to be able to turn on, mac preferred	props	x
1	1	10	Hairbrush	1	Anna -> Ruth		Check with Susie on the preferred brush - will be preset in the desk draw	props	x
1	1	12	Anna's Phone	1	Anna		Needs to be able to turn on - non-descript phone case	props	x
1	1	13	COVID test	1	Anna -> Ben		consumable - remove liquid // preset in Desk Drawer	Props	x
1	1	16	mask	1	Anna -> Ben		consumable // preset in Desk Draw	props	x
1	2	20	Ruth Phone	1	Ruth				x
1	2	20	Ruth Carry On suitcase	1	Ruth		Orange	props	x
			Anna Carry on						

# DESIGN ELEMENTS

AN INTERVIEW WITH AILSA PATERSON  
SET & COSTUME DESIGNER



**WATCH**

Click here to watch our interview with Set and Costume Designer Ailsa Paterson.



Set Model for Housework by Ailsa Paterson





Set model: Ailsa Paterson

## DESIGN QUESTIONS

### WHAT WORLD DO YOU HOPE TO CREATE FOR THE SET OF HOUSEWORK

I hope to create an instantly recognisable element of the architecture of Parliament House in Canberra. The diagonal row of marble columns gives a sense of huge scale, grandeur and power, while suggesting both interior and exterior corridor spaces. The spaces between the columns give the option for choreographed entrances and exits through the many doorways, suggesting the doors into various offices and other meeting places. There is a sense that conversations could be overheard or seen, and that nothing is private. The set design centres around a huge wooden desk in a warm glossy wood tone. This symbol of power and authority will be used for every location, sectioning off portions using light for more intimate scenes. The rotation of the desk allows for a myriad of setting angles and contributes to the fast pace and constant movement of the political world.

Caption here

### WHAT NEXT?

Present your own design concept. What choices could you make to create the different locations?

In designing a concept, choose a scene to design and refer to your choice of stage, production style, set and props. Given that the world of parliament is recognisable how would you create something different?

What props elements would you add to your production and how would these be incorporated to ensure the play maintains the pace?

## WHAT WERE YOUR MAIN CHALLENGES AND HOW DID YOU SOLVE THEM?

The main challenge for this set design was to enable a fluidity of transitions between scenes, and to distil the ideas of the play into a single theatrical gesture. There are a lot of different locations, and the pace of the scene changes needs to match the pace of political wheeling and dealing. I solved this challenge through the rotation capacity of the desk, giving the ability to use the same object for every office. We wanted to make the performers self-sufficient in terms of scene transitions and costume changes. The doubling of roles is the main challenge of the costume design. I needed to create a base look for each performer, on to which they could add the signature element for each character. There is no time for wigs or complete changes, so there needs to be a stylisation of the looks.

## WHY WAS IT IMPORTANT THAT THE PROPS BE SET ON STAGE?

The setting of the props in the many drawers of the oversized desk is another strategy to speed up transitions and eliminate the need for an on stage ASM changing furniture and props. The cast can enter, sit at the desk, open the drawer in front of them and lift out whatever they need to begin their scene.



## IS THERE A FEATURE OF THE DESIGN THAT YOU SECRETLY LOVE THE MOST?

I like the medley of chairs we are using. Each suggests a particular location, while bringing in the colour palette of the house of reps and the senate. The chair for the PM is my dad's antique desk chair. There is a convention of using one chair to reflect the location, and using others from the medley as needed. I like that we don't need to fully articulate each space, or clutter it with set decoration.



# DESIGN ELEMENTS

AN INTERVIEW WITH NIGEL LEVINGS  
LIGHTING DESIGNER



## HOW DO YOU APPROACH LIGHTING FOR A NATURALISTIC PIECE LIKE HOUSEWORK?

Since the performing space is abstracted from the notional physical spaces in which the scenes are set, it is important to find some characterising quality to the lighting for each scene in order to help the audience understand the flow of scenes from space to space. How different does the lighting feel between Ruth's parliamentary office and the parliamentary chamber itself and how does this look compared to the foyer spaces of parliament. Constriction of lit space, such as making Ruth's office a tighter area of light may not always work because doing that places a constraint on how broadly the actors use the overall stage space. In a rehearsal room, where the play develops, all areas of the rehearsal space have equal visual value, and this is not the same as a lit stage space where the visual significance of space is something that is determined and created by the lighting designer.

The flow of time through the play is also important. The text sets each scene in sequential time, from Friday morning in Ruth's electoral office, so some indication of time of day in the lighting will help the audience sense the narrative drive of the piece. I have created a document that lists the scenes

sequentially with their allocated time of day and their physical placement. As the play develops in rehearsal I will extend this document to include the physical location of the actors in each scene and from this work out how much of the acting space needs to be lit at any one time. This is often not easy as light has the irritating quality of travelling in straight lines and not stopping once it has lit the actor, so the decision about where the light ends up after completing its actor illuminating task will always compromise any desire to confine the area of the stage.

## WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES YOU FACE? HOW DO YOU RESOLVE THEM?

One of the challenges is working out how to deal with a set that is twisted on an angle when the traditional lighting positions and overhead lighting bars are all square to the proscenium. If I twist all the lighting angles to correspond to the back wall and columns of the set then I compromise our desire to largely conceal the overhead lighting positions behind the borders in the theatre - which of course always run square across the stage. If I don't twist the overhead lighting positions then some areas of the stage, in particular the corridor area upstage are technically difficult to light as each individual lighting instrument along the lighting bar will



have a different angle of incidence to the set and hence it will be difficult to make a series of lighting instruments feel as though they are one coherent lighting image when they are combined together. How to resolve this is the current challenge in creating the lighting rig at this early stage of the development of the production.

The other challenge will be how to deal with the scene to scene structure of the play. This will be a case of responding to the way in which the directors wants to handle these transitions which is something that will arise from the rehearsal process. For example we might opt to mark decisively each change of scene by inserting some sort of transitional lighting state which might be needed for costume changes or something like that. This depends on how the direction deals with ends of scenes, whether all the actors in that scene make a coherent exit before the actors in the next scene enter or if the scene end needs to be marked with some sort of lighting change that is the equivalent of a blackout that allows actors to exit in a way that is not part of the scene. This is part of the overall question of how you deal with the truncation of time in cutting from scene to scene, the ellipsis that separates each scene.

### **WHAT SIGNIFICANT LIGHTING MOMENTS SHOULD WE LOOK OUT FOR IN THE PLAY?**

I don't know that there will be any significant lighting moments in the play, I will be concentrating more on ensuring actor visibility rather than trying to impress with any sensational moments of lighting, Watch out for how each scene is characterised in terms of the lighting and see if any of it triggers your imaginations, to say, 'yes I know this sort of space, I recognise it'. In this kind of naturalistic play it is important that the lighting serves the tasks of actor visibility and if in some ways you don't notice the lighting at all then I will have done my task well. Of course this disclaimer does not refer to those audience members with an educated eye who can see the skills on display from the creative team without disturbing their own pleasures in following Emily Steel's witty and thoughtful narrative about what happens to those people who are drawn to make the world a better place through parliamentary politics.





Ailsa Paterson '24



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# SCRIPT EXCERPT

ANNA: We've found that the public, really respond to her authenticity. The way they did to yours, when you entered politics as an environmental campaigner. When you decided that, instead of saving one tree, or ten, if you became an MP you could save millions of trees. When Ruth talks about health and wellbeing, they're not just words to her, she's speaking from a place of having physically cared for people, having stitched up wounds and taken blood and, forgive me Ruth, cleaned up shit. She's seen our health system from the inside, seen the best and the worst of it, who it serves and who it doesn't serve. And her move into politics, far from pulling her away from that place of care, has extended her ability to care for more people, not just in her constituency but across the country. That's why she put forward a Private Member's Bill today, why she asked to meet with you, why she'll be speaking in the Chamber again on Thursday—and why she needs your support.

Paul has been smiling at Anna while she talks. Ruth has not. Kelly is watching them.

RUTH: Thank you, Anna.

PAUL: (To Anna) You've still got it. (To others) Hasn't she? She's still got it. I always said, Kelly, Anna should be running the country. If there hadn't been that stupid business with the—

RUTH: Oh, here are the dumplings.

The Waitress brings two serves.

PAUL: Thank you. thanks. Everyone. Eat.

Over the following, they all—except Ruth—eat dumplings with chopsticks, sometimes undermining what Ruth is saying by dropping one or enjoying it too much.

RUTH: Do you know, Minister, how little we know about the female body?

PAUL: I believe I know something about it. (Glances at Anna.) With a wife and two kids.

RUTH: I'll give you a few examples. You've heard of endometriosis?

PAUL: I believe I have.

RUTH: Do you know that it affects around one in ten women? That it can cause infertility and debilitating pain. Which is often dismissed by doctors as 'normal' period pain. Because we expect women to be in pain. On average it takes six and a half years just to get a diagnosis, and treatments can be so ineffective that some women opt to have their uterus and ovaries removed but there is less—

PAUL: (To Kelly, of the dumplings) They're good, aren't they?

# THEMES & CONCEPTS

## IN HOUSEWORK BY EMILY STEEL

### AMBITION

Emily Steel conducted many interviews and spent hours observing our nation's politicians to try to understand what drives people to enter the world of politics. We can widely accept that most people wish to make a difference, to effect change on some level. There is a genuine wish to make things better in the areas that are most important. For example, we know that Ruth Mandour's background is in nursing and her main drive is to create and pass legislation that enables testing to be conducted on women, an area that she is fiercely advocating for.

What becomes questionable and interesting is where the ambition for the greater change alters to become one's own personal ambition, and what people are willing to do to further their own goals. This is the question that we as an audience are asked to think and reflect on.

### FAMILY

When family is mentioned within politics it appears to be non-compatible. A politician's hours are long and unpredictable, the sitting hours in Canberra, the weeks away from home, the hours in the office make traditional parenting of a family almost impossible. As a domain that was created entirely for the male members of society this was not an issue until recent years when we finally recognise the gender imbalance to our current parliamentary practices.

We are still a significant way from accommodating those who have caring responsibilities, which requires politicians to ensure they have support from others, either in the form of appropriate child care or by relying on family members. Even doing so there still appears to be a dominance on the traditional role model of the female as the main carer. Anna is expected to excel at her role as Chief of Staff but also to somehow be across all that happens with her daughter despite Tim being a completely capable father.

The play asks us to think on this and what it asks of our politicians, particularly female in terms of priorities.

### GENDER AND POLITICS

It is impossible to look at politics, or even society, today without asking the question about the role of gender. Emily's play looks at a first-time female MP, coming up against an established, well-liked and respected male Minister. He has experience, he knows the mechanics of the system and he knows that he is likely to play the game very well.

Ruth is realistic in understanding that she will also need to manage the perceptions that exist around her gender. For example her explanation to Kelly with regards to how she needs to present herself when in the house

### CONSENT AND POWER

Within the play Emily poses the question of where the power balance sits. Not just between the male and female MP's with similar experience and within similar age, but also what that looks like in a 'consensual' relationship. Where does the responsibility lie for decisions made between two consenting adults where there is a power discrepancy?

In February 2018 then Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull issued a directive preventing ministers from having sexual relationships with their staff because "all workplaces should be safe workplaces for women".

This has continued to be the code of conduct within parliament to recognise that there are indeed power imbalances and can such a relationship truly be 'consenting'?



### WHAT NEXT?

What other themes do you believe the play addresses?

Where do you see these in the play?

How closely do you believe this reflects our current political system. List where you believe this to have played out.



Renato Musolino - PHOTO Matt Byrne



Rehearsal, Sunitra Martinelli, Emily Taheny and Benn Welford: Photo Matt Byrne

# SCRIPT EXCERPT

Paul signals to a Waitress (doubles with PM).

PAUL: We'd like another serve of pork dumplings, please—I've got one coming and.. (to the table) beers? We all happy with beer?

RUTH: I won't.

PAUL: Something else?

RUTH: Just water for me.

PAUL: You're very good. Anna, you'll have—

ANNA: I'll have a beer.

PAUL: And Kelly will have what Anna has.

KELLY: I.. sure.

ANNA: You don't have to.

PAUL: (To Waitress) Three more Tsingtaos.  
Waitress goes.

RUTH: Minister—

PAUL: Paul. Ruth. Please call me Paul. Anna calls me Paul, you can call me Paul, Kelly can call me Paul. Okay Kelly?

KELLY: Okay Paul.

PAUL: I can't get my own staff to call me Paul. It's all "Minister, Minister". Something about boundaries and professionalism apparently. We had much more fun in the old days, didn't we Anna?

ANNA: How is Vicky?

PAUL: Hm?

ANNA: I've been thinking about her a lot.

PAUL: Vicky's fine. She's fine.

ANNA: And the boys?

PAUL: Well she's not fine, you know, she's got stage four cancer, but under the circumstances.... Boys are fine. Again, not really, but...

KELLY: I was sorry. To hear about your wife

PAUL: Thank you Kelly.

RUTH: We were all -

PAUL: Ruth! I hear you have a passion project.

RUTH: I do. Yes

PAUL: Anna said, health equality. Very important. Yes.

# INTERESTING INFORMATION

## WOMEN ENTERING POLITICS

**CLICK ON THE LINK TO READ THE MONASH REPORT ON YOUNG WOMEN AND POLITICAL LEADERSHIP WITHIN AUSTRALIA.**



## THE RULES OF PARLIAMENT

Every character in *Housework* communicates the understanding that within the walls of Parliament there is an assumed suppression of your own beliefs, voices and views. The Minister makes it clear that ‘you have to accept that you are a cog in the machine...You play your role. You do your part’ (p.63). Kelly states that she wants a political career to change the world, but she is told she doesn’t know how the system works; ‘You might have wonderful ideas, but this just isn’t how it’s done. You can’t force through legislation on the strength of an idea’ (p.64). *Housework* makes the point that politics is a game they are all playing, and nothing is personal with the understanding that everyone is there to do the ‘right thing’, however how that might be achieved is a ‘grey’ area. What is the right thing one day may not achieve the desired outcome the next.

It is a world of compromise, of negotiation.



Isabella Strada, Ashlee Scott and Susie Youssef in rehearsal: Photo Matt Byrne

# SCRIPT EXCERPT

RUTH: You're sure he'll still remember you?

ANNA: Yep. He'll remember me.

RUTH: Awful thing, with his wife. Did you know her then?

ANNA:Mm hm.

RUTH:Give him a call! God I'm desperate for a wee.

Ruth exits.

Anna takes a deep breath. Makes the call—it goes to voicemail.

ANNA: Hi, Paul's voicemail, it's... Anna. Cooper. Listen I.. I probably should have gone through your office but, I didn't know if I'd reach you and.. there's something I'd really like to talk to you about. Gimme a call. Same number or.. Ruth Mandour's office if.. Okay. Bye.

Kelly enters, wild eyed.

ANNA: You alright?

KELLY:I went to the library.

ANNA: Ah.

KELLY:They brought me the wrong stuff and when I said it's the wrong stuff they said, "No. It's the right stuff. You must be asking the wrong thing." And I said what's the right thing and they said they couldn't tell me because it's my thing. But it's not my thing it's Ruth's thing and Ruth said it's the right thing but it must be the wrong thing and.. what's the right thing, Anna? What's the right thing?

Anna's phone is buzzing.

ANNA: (Into phone) Hi. Paul.

# FURTHER ACTIVITIES



## WRITTEN RESPONSE

There is a great deal of information available currently on Australian politics. Write an article for publication from the perspective of Jackie Powell, the journalist that Kelly calls at the end of the play.

What do you think happens?



## VIEW THE GUIDE HERE



## DISCUSSION & WRITTEN ACTIVITY

Discuss recent political events, from the last few years from the perspective of young women in politics. How does this redefine the landscape for older male politicians? What changes can you see?

Write a report on what we have noticed in the way of change across politics, and how this has impacted work environments. Is this positive or negative?



