

TINY BEAUTIFUL THINGS



EDUCATION RESOURCES

QUEENSLAND THEATRE

Queensland Theatre acknowledges the Jagera and Turrbal people who are the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we work, and their unique relationship with the lands, seas and waterways. We pay our respects to their Elders both past and present, and to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.



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PLAY BRIEFING

MONDAY 12 JUNE 6.00pm

DURATION

1 hour and 30 minutes

CURRICULUM LINKS

Suitable for Years 10-12, Tertiary

WARNINGS

This production contains reference to child sexual abuse, self-harm and attempted suicide.



DRAMA GENERAL SENIOR SYLLABUS 2019

UNIT 1: SHARE

The purpose of celebrating, documenting, empowering and informing audiences through storytelling as a dramatic form: linear and non-linear, Verbatim, Documentary Drama, Collage Drama.

Through sharing both homespun and hard-won advice, how can Tiny Beautiful Things empower young people to find resilience, even in the face of traumatic events.

UNIT 2: REFLECT

The unit engages with the purposes of informing and challenging audiences understanding and empathising with the truth of others' experiences, and chronicling/documenting and celebrating what it is to be human.

How can Tiny Beautiful Things be used to document the lived experience, challenging them with the possibility of self-forgiveness.

ACARA, YEAR 10 DRAMA

Manipulate combinations of the elements of drama to develop and convey the physical and psychological aspects of roles and characters consistent with intentions in dramatic forms and performance styles.

Structure drama to engage an audience through manipulation of dramatic action, forms and performance styles, and by using design elements.

Evaluate how the elements of drama, forms and performance styles in devised and scripted drama convey meaning and aesthetic effect.

PURPOSE	CONTEXT	THEMES	21ST CENTURY SKILLS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empathise • Chronicle • Document • Celebrate • Empower • Educate or inform • Entertain 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sociological • Personal • Dramatic • Generational • Psychological • Imaginative 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resilience • Forgiveness • Rejection • Betrayal • Family • Compassion • Love • Belonging • Identity • abuse • Isolation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critical thinking • Creative thinking • Communication

FORM AND STYLE

- Realism
- Magical Realism
- Verbatim – confessional theatre/auto memoir
- Physical theatre

KEY CONVENTIONS

- 2 and 3-dimensional characters
- Fragmentation - character/costume/props
- Breaking 4th wall
- Focus
- Time/tempo/tempo rhythm
- Beats/units of work
- Objective/Super Objective
- Magic If
- Supernatural transformation
- Physical theatre
- Multiple role playing



CAST AND CREATIVE TEAM

CREATIVES

Director Lee Lewis

Designed Simone Romaniuk

Lighting Designer Bernie Tan-Hayes

Composer/Sound Designer Brady Watkins

Stage Manager Maddison Penglis

Assistant Stage Manager Tia-Hanee Cleary

CAST

Sugar Mandy McElhinney

Letter Writer #1 Stephen Geronimos

Letter Writer #2 Sepi Burgiani

Letter Writer #3 Nic Prior



[Click here](#) to watch writer Nia Vardalos talk about *Tiny Beautiful Things*.



ABOUT

Tiny Beautiful Things values the female structure of helping each other and acknowledges that the advice won't be perfect, but we work it out together. It's the valuing of female wisdom.

Lee Lewis – *Director*

THE BEST ADVICE CAN COME FROM AN UNLIKELY SOURCE.

Cheryl Strayed is many things; a wife, a mother, a daughter, a writer, an ex-heroin user and now, an unpaid, online anonymous advice columnist called Sugar.

Amidst the clutter of family life, she receives emails from strangers urgently needing help navigating the contradictions and complexities of life. Sugar replies with candour, offering her own tough, sweet brand of unadulterated advice designed to offer a path of healing and catharsis. What would you tell someone who is unsure about role-playing as a sexy Santa or the father who feels as dead as his lost son?

Academy Award nominee (*My Big Fat Greek Wedding*), Nia Vardalos adapts this New York Times bestselling book into a stage work that is as authentic and human as the real stories it contains. Dare to reach out and embrace this exquisitely vulnerable play and the questions it poses. The advice you receive may surprise you.



PRE-SHOW ACTIVITIES

PRE-SHOW ACTIVITIES EXPLORE THE THEMES OF:

Movement, Identity, time/
tempo, focus, three-
dimensional characters.



DISCUSS:

- What people do you tend to turn to for advice? (parents/ friends/siblings/etc..) Why do you think they are the people you go to?
- What is the best piece of advice you've ever received from a friend?
- Have you ever followed advice you've heard on social media? If so, what was it and was it helpful?
- Can you describe a social situation you've been in that you've learnt a lesson from? Have you passed what you've learnt onto others?
- Do you think it's possible to forgive someone who you believe has harmed you?
- What lengths would you go to, to fix someone who you believe is struggling to work through a problem?
- When is a moment in your life that you have felt like your advice has been taken and has helped someone understand another's perspective?

“This play is built on the heritage of wisdom shared around kitchen tables and valuing of community”

Lee Lewis – Director



PURPOSE OF ACTIVITY

To explore the variations in movement tension and tempo, determining what it takes to step between one energy level to another, ultimately using this gear change as a foundation for characterization.



DISCUSS:

- How participants felt when the levels of energy changed?



Research articles and YouTube links which reaffirm learning from the activity:

- [Jacques Lecoq Seven Levels of Tension – Invisible Ropes](#)
- [Jacques Lecoq – Introduction \(google.com\)](#)

CREATING CHARACTER – TENSION AND TEMPO

Students are positioned evenly around the room. Instructor walks them through the Jacques Lecoq – Seven levels of Tension.

- **Exhausted or catatonic** – There is no tension in the body at all. The state begins in a complete state of relaxation. If you have to move or speak, it is a real effort.
- **Laidback** – the “Californian” style. Everything you do is cool, relaxed, probably lacking in credibility.
- **Neutral or the “Economic”** – It is what it is. There is nothing more, nothing less. The right amount. No past or future. You are present and aware. It is the state of tension before something happens. Think of a cat sitting comfortably on a wall, ready to leap up if a bird comes near. You move with no story behind your movement.
- **Alert or Curious (farce)** – Look at things. Sit down. Stand up. Indecision. Think of Jacques Tati or Mr. Bean.
- **Suspense or the Reactive (19th-century melodrama)** – A crisis is about to happen. All the tension is in the body, concentrated between the eyes. An in-breath. There’s a delay in your reaction. The body reacts. Is there a bomb in the room?
- **Passionate (opera)** – There is a bomb in the room! The tension has exploded out of the body. Anger, fear, despair. It’s difficult to control.
- **Tragic** – The body can’t move. Petrified. The body is in solid tension.

Levels 1 to 4 are our everyday states, whereas levels 5 to 7 are melodramatic and extraordinary.

Three of the principal skills that he encouraged in his students were *le jeu* (playfulness), *complicité* (togetherness), and *disponibilité* (openness).

VARIATIONS:

1. Walk at a normal tempo, connecting with feet on the ground – examine your movement; moving up through legs, body, pelvis, chest, arms head and discover what each section of the body is doing, how you are holding yourself as you walk.
2. Examine what each part of the body does when they are asked to move at a fast tempo.
3. Similar to Lecoq, work through eight different ‘gears’ of your own body’s movement – remember what changes are made in the body when moving through those different gears. Write down/or mentally remember a word that denotes this change. As the gears change, your movement changes tempo. What physical action would you be doing at the moment the gears change?





DISCUSS:

- What problems did participants encounter when asked to examine how another walked?
- How did you feel when asked to take on the characteristics of another? Did tension shift in your body as the tempo changed?

4. Once you have discovered what the gears are for your own body, team up with a partner A/B. B follows A walking around the room, taking note of how they move in the space. Watch how their feet land on the floor, they knees, hips, gut, chest, shoulders, neck, arms....try to take on their movement. Ask A to move out of the space and let B continue walking around the room.
5. B moves through the eight different 'gears' of body movement that they instinctively feel A would as the tempo of movement gets faster.

“The body knows things about which the mind is ignorant.”

Jacques Lecoq



Nia Vardalos with cast in *Tiny Beautiful Things*. The Public Theatre, New York. Photographer: Joan Marcus.



PRE-SHOW ACTIVITIES

PURPOSE OF ACTIVITY

To challenge participants to discover the absolute ordinary in everyday activities – what is the outside manifestation of an activity and how does that live inside the body.



DISCUSS:

- Discuss who portrayed a character that was naturalistic?
- How did they achieve that?
- How did they use their facial expressions, body language, gestures and voice?

BABY BIRD

Ask the cohort to sit in a circle. Start by passing a crumpled up piece of paper around the circle and telling them it is a bird that has fallen out of its nest, fully feathered but not yet able to fly. The students must be very gentle. Keep talking about the bird, its colour, size, the brightness of its eyes, ‘Look at its beak opening, perhaps it’s hungry’; ‘How its claws grip, don’t they?’ – you are trying to build up belief by building up visual facts to hang onto. When the bird returns to you, you can decide what to do with it:

Students may mash it in their hands – this cruelly tests belief – those who have begun to believe will be horrified. They could gently place it in a box, or take it outside. It is up to the student. The seriousness with which you approach this gives the students a clue as to how seriously these actors’ exercises should be taken.

VARIATIONS:

4 Baby Birds

Place 4 pieces of crumpled up paper in the space. Ask 4 students to enter the space and imagine that they have found a baby bird that has fallen out of its nest, fully feathered but not yet able to fly. Try to be as realistic as possible. What will your character do. Characters do not interact with the others on stage. Repeat again with another 4. You may want to change what the piece of paper becomes e.g. a bird egg, a kitten etc.

I work to see what happens with the actors to find those moments where movement happens and what rises up in it. It’s the combination of actors that will make moments more or less impressive and layer meaning.

Lee Lewis – *Director*



PRE-SHOW ACTIVITIES

PURPOSE OF ACTIVITY

To challenge students to spiral closer to the idea of movement, strip away unnecessary action and allow the gravitational pull to move them closer to the complete character.



Research activities and texts to extend learning:

- [Games for Actors and Non-Actors – Augusto Boal – Google Books](#)
- [Style for Actors – Google Books](#)

TRANSFORMING OBJECTS

Have a range of everyday objects in a box: cup, scissors, a hat, scarf, a book and so on... Place an object in the centre of the space and ask the cohort to sit down and create an audience facing the object. State: 'using your active imagination, imagine what the object can become... It is a...' and then elicit creative answers from the class.

Put a new object in the middle and ask a student to enter the space as a character who will interact with the object, but the object must be transformed into something else. The actor must play the improvisation as natural as possible. The audience should guess what the object becomes and discuss its level of naturalism. Play so that each student gets a turn to naturalistically transform an object. A good idea to get the actor in the space and swap the object before the new actor enters the space.

VARIATION:

- Place the objects around the room ensuring that there are enough for every student. Ask the students to stand in front of one of the objects. Play with the object in a realistic, naturalistic way eg: open the book/read/close the book etc.. Ensure that the movement with the object can be created in **four** or less actions.
- Think about the tempo you would use to do this as yourself, and the tension that you'd hold in your body whilst doing the activity.
- Start stripping away unnecessary movement and spiral towards what a very stripped back, realistic movement would be with the object. Ensure that the students strip away at least one of the **four** actions.

The characters change themselves and each other, and the catalyst for change in this play is love. Change, and the need to accept it, is fundamental to human life and therefore central to the purpose of theatre.

Simone Romaniuk – *Designer*



PRE-SHOW ACTIVITIES

PURPOSE OF ACTIVITY

To inform participants of the patterns of movement which underpin human relationship and understanding.



DISCUSS:

- Can you describe the rhythm of this script?
- How did you and your partner incorporate the physical pull and push of the words?
- Why did you choose to physicalise the script in the way you did?
- Why should this engage an audience?



Research article or books which reaffirms learning from the connected activity:

- [Acting Techniques: Lecoq with Sam Hardie \(spotlight.com\)](#)
- [Stanislavski and the Actor: The Method of Physical Action – Jean Benedetti – Google Books](#)

SCRIPTED – NEUTRAL TEXT

Explore the following Neutral Script through:

- Physicality – what are the biggest movements you can do and say to these words – what are the smallest?
- Through push and pull – physically hold each other and push and pull on the lines.
- Walking in the space continuously whilst saying the lines
- Examining the relationship between words and actions - what are you doing when you speak these words?
- Contradiction – by recognising occasions where the body might not be expressing the same emotion as the words
- Patterns of movement which underpin particular words or phrases

Pair-up with a classmate using the script below. Decide upon the who, where, what, when and why and then explore and block the physicality, ambiguity and opposite emotional states of the characters.

A: Did you.

B: I thought so.

A: Really.

B: Great.

I think the arc of the real story of this is a woman who finds herself in that moment in her life where suddenly somehow she's got two kids and a husband and not enough time in the day and she goes what's happened to me? Where have I gone? Who am I? How do I find myself again?

Lee Lewis – Director



PRE-SHOW ACTIVITIES

PURPOSE OF ACTIVITY

To empower students to step into another's shoes and identify how choices made in realistic dramatic action and internalization can alter outcomes in perception.



DISCUSS:

- Thinking about SAM, what would you be feeling internally in that situation?
- Would you react the same? Would you react differently? Would that affect your tempo/rytham?
- What about the character of MUM? What would you be feeling internally if you were in that situation?



Research article or books which reaffirms learning from the connected activity:

- [Living Drama Student Book with 1 Access Code for 26 Months, 5th edition by Bruce Burton](#)

TEMPO RHYTHM

Stanislavski felt that an inner and an outer tempo and rhythm were vital if you were to enact movements truthfully and link them to the expression of emotions and feelings. He linked tempo to the speed of an action or feeling and the rhythm to the intensity or depth of the experience.

TEMPO could be FAST, MEDIUM or SLOW.

RHYTHM could be EXTREMELY LIGHT, VERY LIGHT, LIGHT, SOMEWHAT HARD, HEAVY, VIGOROUS

Students will rehearse and practice the attached scene EXERCISE 1 (Appendix 1). One will be PARENT other SAM. Students perform back their scene to the rest of the class. Have an open discussion which identifies and explores the actor's choice of TEMPO and RHYTHM.

Have student HIGHLIGHT changes in the TEMPO in one colour and the RHYTHM in another.

EXERCISE 1:

SCRIPT

Sam's bedroom. Sam is searching for his/her homework that he/she did last night.

SAM: Mum... mum... I swear, if I don't find it I'm going to scream... Mum!

MUM (off stage): What, Sam?

SAM: Did you move my science homework? It was on my desk and now I can't find it anywhere. I've literally looked everywhere for it. Up. Down. Under the bed, behind the wardrobe... Where is it?

Sam is searching everywhere and getting more frantic.

MUM: Hurry up, Sam. You're going to be late for school.

SAM: School? I won't be going to school. I'm not going if I don't find it. Mr Reece will blow my head off with a bunsen burner if I don't hand it in.

MUM (off stage): Have you checked your bag?

SAM: What? Why would I put it in my bag?

Sam begins to look in their bag and eventually finds the homework inside.



PRE-SHOW ACTIVITIES

MAGIC IF

Another important technique from Stanislavski is the MAGIC IF.

What would you do IF you were in that situation?

Stanislavski called the ‘what if’ question the ‘magic if’ because the question took the actors out of everyday reality and into the creative world of the imagination.

“As If” leads to action - both internal and external - and it does this without force, in a natural way.” “This helps to put you in the character’s shoes; it acts as a lever lifting us into the world where it is possible to create – the world of imagination. It does not ask you to believe something is real, you simply act as if you were in those circumstances.

VARIATION:

Exploration of realistic reaction/internalized emotion.

1. You are in the middle of getting ready to go out on your first date (putting on make up, in the middle of drying hair, in the shower). What would you do if the power went out?
2. Your car has broken down and you are isolated alone at night. You phone your parents. What would you do if your phone went dead before telling them where you were?
3. You are on public transport going for a very important job interview. What would you do if you realised you were on the wrong train?

Express each of the above through movement and emotional exploration.

The ‘magic if’ is not just an important theatrical technique, it is the key to all drama. By visualising an imaginary situation, and then projecting ourselves into it as different people, we can live a whole world of experiences and emotions that would never be available to us in reality.”

(Living Drama p.31)



PRE-SHOW ACTIVITIES

PURPOSE OF ACTIVITY

To identify changes in objectives which can determine character attitude and response.



Research article or books which reaffirms learning from the connected activity:

- [Living Drama Student Book with 1 Access Code for 26 Months, 5th edition by Bruce Burton](#)

SCENE EXERCISE

In every scene of a play the character will face a range of obstacles. The actor must break down each obstacle into smaller UNITS.

To define a UNIT the actor must look for where a new action begins and where it ends. Each UNIT within the scene the actor should ask himself 'WHAT HAPPENS?'. Every UNIT there is a creative OBJECTIVE – a goal. What does your character want to do?

You need to be able to define the character's objective in each UNIT. The OBJECTIVE needs to be expressed in terms of an ACTIVE VERB. Active verbs are the ACTIONS the characters do in the scene to reach their OBJECTIVE. ACTION: what one character does to another character to achieve his or her objective.

EXAMPLE:

Character A wants to (**ACTION VERB**) Character B to get (**OBJECTIVE-DESIRED RESPONSE**)

eg: Mary wants to SEDUCE Michael to get the money his father left him.

or

Character A (**ACTION VERB**) Character B to (**OBJECTIVE-DESIRED RESPONSE**)

eg: Hannah OBEYS her father to get the recognition of being the best daughter



OBJECTIVE/ACTIVE VERBS

LOVING WORDS

accept / admire / comfort / compliment / confide /
enlighten / entertain / idolize / liberate / lure / pamper
/ praise / protect / rescue / seduce / tease / transform
/ treat / validate / welcome / woo

ENCOURAGING WORDS

acknowledge / arouse / befriend / cheer / congratulate
/ convert / cultivate / elevate / empower / encourage
/ excite / greet / heal / help / ignite / inflate / influence
/ invite / persuade / pressure / reassure / rejuvenate
/ spark / stimulate / tantalize / toughen / train / tutor /
urge

APPROVING WORDS

accommodate / advise / alert / assure / confess /
defend / endorse / follow / guard / hail / maintain /
manage / obey / proclaim / reinforce / rule / stabilize /
stead / toast / uphold

MANIPULATING WORDS

amaze / amuse / bait / blackmail / brainwash / charm
/ coerce / corrupt / dazzle / entice / exploit / fascinate
/ flatter / force / judge / manipulate / negate / outwit /
overcome / probe / rush / sabotage / seduce / tempt /
test / vilify

PROVOKING WORDS

abandon / agitate / alert / annoy / antagonize /
bewilder / bother / challenge / confront / confuse
/ disrupt / distract / disturb / dominate / frighten /
frustrate / haunt / horrify / infuriate / interrogate /
interrupt / irritate / outrage / panic / pester / provoke
/ repulse / ridicule / shame / shock / sicken / startle
/ surprise / terrify / terrorize / threaten / traumatize /
upset

UNDERMINING WORDS

betray / bluff / cheat / con / corrupt / deceive /
delude / dupe / entrap / flatter / fleece / foil / fool /
humour / kid / malign / misdirect / misguide / mislead
/ puzzle / snare / swindle / trick / undercut / undermine

DISCOURAGING WORDS

abandon / admonish / alienate / avoid / belittle /
censor / criticize / curb / demoralize / depress /
disappoint / discourage / disregard / evade / exclude
/ hassle / hound / ignore / insult / irritate / isolate
/ mock / obstruct / offend / oppose / ostracize
/ prohibit / prosecute / punish / refuse / reject /
renounce / repel / repress / resist / restrain / restrict /
sadden / scorn / silence / stop / suppress / tolerate

HARMING WORDS

abuse / accuse / assault / attack / blame / brutalize /
bully / criticize / curse / deceive / defame / degrade
/ discredit / disgrace / disown / embarrass / harm /
humiliate / hurt / imprison / incriminate / intimidate /
mimic / molest / neglect / numb / offend / oppress /
outlaw / overthrow / overturn / overwhelm / paralyze
/ patronize / pester / punish / repress / rob / scare /
scold / smear / taunt / violate / warn

DESTROYING WORDS

abolish / annihilate / avenge / banish / conquer /
dehumanize / destroy / dethrone / devastate / devour
/ eliminate / exterminate / finish / nullify / obliterate /
oust / persecute / quell / ransack / ravage / ruin / rule
/ sabotage / sacrifice / shatter / silence / suppress /
terminate / torment / torture / wreck



PRE-SHOW ACTIVITIES

Within the following section of the script *Tiny Beautiful Things* select one character from the scene and explore the OBJECTIVES of that character. As a class read through the scene and discuss its narrative content and context. Discuss how/if the OBJECTIVE of each character changes in the text.

Divide into groups of 4 – and read through the two scenes. Students are to annotate the different UNITS within the scene, remembering a UNIT changes when the OBJECTIVE/ACTION VERB changes. Document the character's OBJECTIVE/ACTION VERB for each UNIT identified.

See **Appendix 1** for student script.

SCRIPT SECTION

EPISTLES #2

LETTER WRITER #2 Dear Sugar,

We still don't know who the hell you are and seriously, who the hell do you think you are? This week you're telling people to leave their marriages? Last week it was the opposite: you said don't have an affair; What are you trying to make us do?

Signed,

Not Buying It

SUGAR Dear Not Buying It, My goal isn't to make anyone do anything, I'm offering advice based on my personal experiences.

LETTER WRITER #1 Oh wow, did you just make this about you?

LETTER WRITER #3 Are you a therapist?

SUGAR No.

LETTER WRITER #1 Are you *in* therapy?

SUGAR No.

LETTER WRITER #3 Are you even qualified for this gig?

LETTER WRITER #2 Dear Sugar,

Your advice is all over the place! How can you suggest in one column that we stick to convention and then in the very next one say that we gotta be bold?! Make up your mind. Whatever. Why am I trying to figure out who you are, do you even know who you are? Make a choice. Pick a lane.

Signed,

Still Not Buying It



PRE-SHOW ACTIVITIES

EPISTLES #4

LETTER WRITER #2 Dear Sugar –

LETTER WRITER #1 Dear Sugar –

LETTER WRITER #3 Dear Sugar –

LETTER WRITER #2 Dear Sugar –

LETTER WRITER #1 Dear Sugar –

LETTER WRITER #3 Dear Sugar –

LETTER WRITER #2 Dear Sugar, If it's true that drug addicts stop maturing at the time they started using, then the same thing happens at weddings!

LETTER WRITER #1 Dear Sugar, I am worried I will die alone.

LETTER WRITER #3 Dear Sugar, When it comes to holding down a job, I'm the worst.

LETTER WRITER #2 Dear Sugar, I think I'm attracted to my teacher.

LETTER WRITER #1 Dear Sugar, Are you there?

LETTER WRITER #2 Dear Sugar, Where are you?

LETTER WRITER #3 Dear Sugar, Why aren't you answering me?

LETTER WRITER #2 Dear Sugar, My roommate is selfish. Are you ever going to answer me?.

VARIATION:

After reflection, workshop the scene again, and present, this time as a polished improvisation which focuses on changing the ACTION VERBS for Sugar.

- How would Sugar's language change?
- How would Sugar's vocal delivery change?
- How do the letter writers respond to the change?



ABOUT NIA VARDALOS – *Tiny Beautiful Things* Writer

Academy Award® nominated screenwriter and actor, New York Times bestselling author, New York Times Critic’s Pick playwright, Nia Vardalos recently directed her screenplay, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding 3*.

My Big Fat Greek Wedding is the number one romantic comedy of all time, with Vardalos receiving an Academy Award® and WGA nom for Original Screenplay, Golden Globe and SAG acting noms, winning the Independent Spirit and People’s Choice awards. Selected credits: Wrote/starred/produced cult-hit *Connie And Carla*, wrote/starred/directed *I Hate Valentine’s Day*, starred in *My Life In Ruins*, and wrote/starred/produced *MY BIG FAT GREEK WEDDING 2 and 3*.

In the last year: Guillermo Del Toro’s *CABINET OF CURIOSITIES*, *Ivy And Bean*, *The Curse Of Bridge Hollow* Also, wrote/starred Audible series, *Motivated!*, guested on numerous television shows.

Born and raised in Canada, Vardalos is classically trained in Shakespeare and musical theater, performed in *Twelfth Night* and many musicals such as *Kismet*, *Music Man* and *Company*, (winning the Broadway Award.) An alumnus of The Second City, Nia Vardalos won Chicago’s Jefferson Best Actress award, and performs in 24 Hour Plays on Broadway.

Wrote/starred in her play, New York Times Critic’s Pick, *Tiny Beautiful Things*, published by Samuel French (Concord Theatricals), is on Top Ten Most Produced Plays list. Vardalos is also the New York Times Bestselling author of her memoir *Instant Mom* and donates all proceeds to adoption charities. To date, the information from the book has placed 1700 children in permanent homes.



Nia Vardalos in *Tiny Beautiful Things*. The Public Theatre, New York. Photographer: Joan Marcus.



CREATIVES



PRE-SHOW QUESTIONS

- What is your initial impression of the set?
- What is it about the set that gives you a sense of time and place? (the world that Sugar inhabits)
- When looking closer at the set, what do you notice?
- How do you think the set will be used?

POST SHOW DISCUSSION – DESIGN ELEMENTS

- How was the set, combined with performance technologies, used to enhance key narrative plotpoints or heighten the dramatic elements?
- How was the essence of fluidity of time found in the set design?
- How was this set design realised?
- How did the actors interact with the set?

DESIGN

A set designer is responsible for the design including all the scenery, furniture and props that the audience will see. It is the role of the set designer to help to draw the audience into the world of the play, helping to convey the specific time and place.

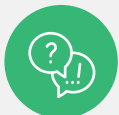
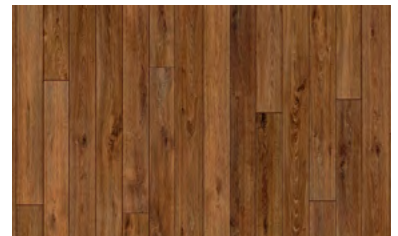
TASK

Consider the set design below by Simone Romaniuk and answer the following questions.



“Quite literally I’ve given her a messy realistic house to clean up. I wanted her body to not necessarily be doing the same thing as her mouth and her brain, like a counterpoint picture to the difficulty of what she’s talking about. That was the picture I have of my mother. She talked while she was doing all these other things. Mum had to have busy hands to get everything done in her day and while she was doing that, there was a disconnect between her brain, her mouth and her body and I suppose the chance to capture that that’s why I gave her a real space.”

Lee Lewis – *Director*



INTERESED IN DESIGN?

The following universities offer design courses:

- [QUT - Bachelor of Fine Arts \(Technical Production\)](#)
- [NIDA - BFA \(Design for Performance\)](#)
- [WAAPA | Production Design : Production and Design : Our courses : Courses & Admissions](#)
- [Master of Production Design - The University of Melbourne](#)





IN CONVERSATION WITH SIMONE ROMANIUK – *Tiny Beautiful Things* Designer

Talk us through your training in design – where you studied, what was your pathway?

I've been doing this for 20 years now...it's quite a long time. I went to Queensland College of Art and studied 3D design and then went to NIDA and did set and costume design. If anyone is looking at doing theatre design I would recommend they do a design or arts degree prior to going to do just theatre design. After that I started working on some small shows that other graduates from NIDA had started working on. Then shows with Queensland Theatre and Sydney Theatre Company. In my year at NIDA there were 8 designers – some who have moved into film and tv – it is a very niche area.

How does your initial process of design work in tandem with the design ideas of the director?

You read the script to see if you like the show and want to work on it, and then meet the director and have a general talk about what they want. Some are very definite and say they want to set it in this time and do exactly this with it. Some are not really sure and say...let's explore the possibility of this... with this play Lee was talking about the characters mostly.

In a way this play could be set in a black room with four chairs, but what does add a nice layer in this is that if its in a very naturalistic house, then you get more of her as a person and you can see she has children and she is a busy woman. She's making lunches and she's doing the laundry. She's fitting in her work and her writing around other parts of her life which informs her as a character.

It's a real house – a rented house. Her furniture might be second hand, some nice and some from Ikea – it's a bit of a mix and that real things aren't all matched. I went away and was looking at references...

How did you incorporate the letter writers into this real space?

Because the three letter writers are not naturalist characters in the house they can move into her mind and space at any time. They have emailed her and she thinks about those emails whilst she's doing something else... maybe she thinks about them in the middle of cleaning the bath or making the lunches. The letter writers can just inhabit the space in her mind.

The idea is that people have this 'workspace' at home but they might use it not in the way that you think especially for a writer because she wouldn't be just sitting at that desk writing those letters...it's all the time she's thinking about writing back to the letters. Then I had this idea of the frame works and that they could move through the space. We talked about if it was a realistic frame with skirting boards, but in the end it was just that the steel frame was a nice abstraction of the wall.

How have you developed and conveyed mood within *Tiny Beautiful Things*?

Each of the stories has a different mood, ultimately they are all positive and uplifting but some of those stories are very grim and dark and sad. I guess in a way it is a supporting space, rather than the space imposing a mood on the play. It's not a play about fear or longing and loss – it's about the human experience. A lot of that will come through the lighting design and where in the house the scene will unfold. The overarching look of messiness - it does need to feel comfortable and lived in, so you could imagine this could be anyone I know – this person living in this space and conversing with these letter writers.



IN CONVERSATION WITH SIMONE ROMANIUK – *Tiny Beautiful Things* Designer

Have you defined a place of special meaning...a place within the set that has a symbolic quality?

This play is unusual in that there's not a plot as such, it's just stories of characters and is a series of characters. The set itself is symbolic as a supporting space for the characters in the play and the experiences they've had that they feel comfortable revealing to Sugar.

How have you used the element of time within the production?

Sugar has her routine of her life, but it could be any moment within that is where things are happening. The letter writers may have written to her two days before, but when she's thinking about it and when she responds might be a different moments in time even though it's played out simultaneously on stage.

Is there any fragmentation of costuming that allows the actors to change character?

In this one the director does want the characters to put on different costumes. They'll inhabit where their presentation is. They are different characters that can be interpreted in any way. They'll do a certain thing naturally when you see them, so I'll base their costume of that. It's just a real person's clothes – they've got something out of their wardrobe and put it on.

Sugar wears the same 'at home clothes' throughout – comfy pants, comfy soft long sleeve tee shirt and shoes and a long cardigan. Because it is not linear in structure and there isn't a plot that we need to show.. now it's two days later, now it's winter, now it's summer.... she's stays in the same clothes throughout. The only thing she'll do is take something on or off as she feels comfortable or anxious.



Nia Vardalos and cast in *Tiny Beautiful Things*. The Public Theatre, New York. Photographer: Joan Marcus.



CONNECTING PERFORMANCE WITH DRAMATIC LANGAUGES

The performance is non-linear in creation. In groups, students are to reflect on the performance and discuss why the performance was created in this non-linear way.

- How was time used to enhance the performance?
- How does the non-linear nature of the performance contribute to your interpretation of dramatic meaning?
- How do the dramatic languages contribute to the narrative, construction of character and enhancement of dramatic meaning?
- How was tension evident within performance?
- What dramatic action by the actors highlighted tension?
- What aspects of the human condition/human context were foregrounded?



IN CONVERSATION WITH LEE LEWIS – Director

What drew you to the script *Tiny Beautiful Things*?

I found myself responding on a need level to the to the story of Tiny Beautiful Things and I thought there's something inside this play I think could be quite wonderful for audience because it's all the problems as opposed to trying to escape by ignoring everything....

The idea of a play that's based on an advice column was appealing as it's the story of a woman who decides to write an advice column and how that shapes her, the human. There's something really beautiful about that. It has this real-life heritage of kitchen tables and who you go to for a bit of advice when things aren't working in your life. If you're lucky and you live in a community of people there's a friend who you can go to and sit at their kitchen table, have a cup of tea and talk about what's happening in your world.. this is happening, what do I do?... and your friend goes ...Oh my God that's terrible! Well have you thought about this...? This play is built on the heritage of wisdom shared around kitchen tables and a valuing of community.

I think the arc of the real story of this is a woman who finds herself in that moment in her life where suddenly somehow she's got two kids and a husband and not enough time in the day and she goes what's happened to me? Where have I gone? Who am I? How do I find myself again?

She finds herself by thinking about other people's problems rather than her own and she realises that for all the mess that her life has been up to that point, all the bad decisions add up to a lot of knowledge that she can share with other people.

I think the arc of the play is a woman learning to value her life for what it is, not what she thinks it should be. It values the female structure of helping each other and acknowledges that the advice won't be perfect, but we work it out together. It's the valuing of female wisdom.





IN CONVERSATION WITH LEE LEWIS – Director

What styles of theatre do you incorporate to blend the immediacy of realistic dialogue with a sense of narrative that is non-linear and surrealistic in the intrusion of ‘others’ into the scene?

I don't think in terms of style – I work in terms of temperature. I wanted something very warm, and I wanted to play with time in a non-literal way. It's 18 months of her actual life contracted into an idea of not one continuous night but contained time.

I'm probably pulling very lightly on traditions of magic realism with the idea that someone can be there and then not be there. I also use filmic traditions of focus pulling. With theatre you use light to focus on someone then to let go of that person. I also use musical rhythms, different counter pointing rhythms. For me I'm trying to do a live sculpture – it's very fluid and slippery. Someone's there and then suddenly they're not there because you're looking at something else and they can walk away and you never saw them go.

I like trying to find ways to make people standing right in front of you invisible and then make them visible again. I love the feeling in black light theatre and using corridor of light theatre – you know where there's nothing there and then it just pops in to focus.

I want the letter writers to walk through walls because it's like when you're alone at home cleaning you think through a lot of things, you have imaginary conversations with friends, you practise things. If my partner walks in on my cleaning I've got this look at on my face and I kind of literally jump back out into the real world as I was in a fully intense conversation with someone – about a play usually.

If an idea walks through the wall into my head, I have that conversation then it evaporates. I just want them to feel like ordinary people with these big questions because it's ordinary people that have awful things happen. They need help. They should just look like us and sound like us and make a cup of tea like us.

What are four pivotal moments in the script and how did you highlight them in terms of dramatic action or design decisions?

I have a vocabulary of things in my head where I think things could happen, I work to see what happens with the actors to find those moments and I find what rises up in it. It's the combination of actors that will make moments more or less impressive and layer meaning.

However, there is the moment that she first looks at one of the letter writers – I know that that's a big moment. There's a moment of touch where one of the letter writers will actually touch her and yes I know there'll be a suspension moment in there somewhere. We'll have to wait and see what comes from the exploration with the actors!

How did you manage the shifts in time that play out through the production?

Dimness and physical rearrangement of the bodies in the dimness signals that this is not continuous time. The question of how I create the quiet in the house in the middle of the night is connected to time. I can only create quiet if I put sound in and then take it out. There'll be a music interlude somewhere just to let her have a break from talking and so that there's also a sense of quiet afterward.

I'll also have an element of real time – a kettle that boils in real time and toast made in real time which is much longer than they are in theatrical time. A kettle boiling takes forever on stage so that will give the audience a very real sense of time.



FREEZE FRAMING LINKED TO CONVENTIONS OF STYLE – REALISM/MAGICAL REALISM/ PHYSICAL THEATRE

TASK 1

- Ask students to choose four moments and present these as freeze frames
- Ask students to identify conventions of styles which could be highlighted in these four key moments from either the list below, or additional conventions the student identifies as linked to **Unit 1 & 2**:
 - *2 and 3-dimensional characters*
 - *Fragmentation — character/costume/props*
 - *Breaking 4th wall*
 - *Focus*
 - *Time/tempo/tempo rhythm*
 - *Beats/units of work*
 - *Objective/Super Objective*
 - *Magic If*
 - *Supernatural transformation*
 - *Physical theatre*
 - *Multiple role playing*
- Repeat the exercise, this time bringing the freeze frames to life in short scenes which incorporate the selected convention.
- Ask audience to respond to the use of the convention in the short scene in terms of dramatic meaning, ie: *how did the use of the convention highlight dramatic meaning in each scene?*



Nia Vardalos and cast in *Tiny Beautiful Things*. The Public Theatre, New York. Photographer: Joan Marcus.



DRAMATIC ELEMENTS

TASK 2

Identify three dramatic elements and use questions as a base to analyse dramatic action.

The elements of Role and Time have been completed as examples for you.

Use the table below as a template:

ELEMENT OF DRAMA	GENERAL QUESTIONS	DRAMATIC ACTION
<p>Role/Character and Relationship</p> <p><i>Definition:</i></p> <p><i>The performer adopts the values, attitudes, status and motivations of one or more roles; performers act and react to the given circumstances of the drama, and their relationships with others are defined by the values, attitudes and behaviours particular to the type or status they represent.</i></p> <p>Performers take on more than one role throughout the dramatic action of <i>Tiny Beautiful Things</i>. This requires them to embody someone or something beyond themselves to make a believable and credible character for the audience.</p> <p>It is also important to think about their role in the dramatic action. What physical attributes did they embody in creating the role? Movement, physicality, speech...how were these used to establish differing roles. How was the design of the performance (set/lighting/soundscaping/costume) used to enhance creation of role?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Was the piece character or plot driven? How was the creation of roles used to help create the performance? Did the actors play more than one role? How did they do this? What changes were evident in their performance? How were the roles established or maintained? 	<p>The creation of character in <i>Tiny Beautiful Things</i> demonstrates the skills of the actor, through clear articulation of voice and movement, without the necessity of changing costumes.</p> <p>As the letter writers transition through the performance they act and react to Sugar through controlled movement which involves change in posture, tempo of movement and modulation of voice.</p> <p>Sugar is depicted as the continuous voice of reason and logic through even tempo delivery of lines and controlled movement where as the Letter Writers are more erratic and fast paced in movement as they transition through their characters.</p> <p>The skill of being able to transition swiftly from character to character depicting a multitude of voices highlights the universality of the problems the human race is currently facing. Devoid of costume change, the multiple roles by each letter writer illustrates that everyone is struggling with something in their lives, which impacts on the way they move fluidly in the world.</p>
<p>Time</p> <p><i>Definition:</i></p> <p><i>an element of drama; refers to the time or period in which dramatic action is set and the management of tempo, pace and rhythm in dramatic action.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What aspects of time did you identify within the performance? How did the performance demonstrate changes in time? 	<p>Time within <i>Tiny Beautiful Things</i> was non-linear and included a surrealist element where periods of time coexist in fluid symbiosis. The letter writers float in and out of the fluid set, through see through wall, controlled physical movements and shadowy lighting, which masks exits and entrances. The use of controlled slow tempo movement and the essence of being 'in' the space and time, but not being 'of' the space/time, contributes to the understanding of the longevity of personal problems that unites the human condition.</p>



ELEMENT OF DRAMA	GENERAL QUESTIONS	DRAMATIC ACTION
Symbol		
Language		
Mood		



SUGGESTED PRACTICE RESPONDING QUESTIONS

TASK 3

PRODUCTION ELEMENTS

ATAR - F4

- Within *Tiny Beautiful Things* the valuing of female wisdom is crafted through a woman learning to accept her own life for what it is, not what it could be. Through the elements of **symbol** and **mood** and a **selected convention of realism**, analyse how choices made by the director and designer highlight the essence of shared wisdom.

YEAR 10

- Use the elements of time and characterization to analyse the connectivity of mental health issues in contemporary society.



IA2 DRAMATIC CONCEPT

In this unit, you have explored how drama can be used to share understandings of the human experience. You have experienced a range of linear dramatic forms and non-linear dramatic forms that have used a range of dramatic conventions to tell stories.

TASK 4

Working as a theatre maker, you will view Queensland Theatre's directed live performance of Nia Vardalos' *Tiny Beautiful Things*. Using this performance as stimulus you must produce an original dramatic concept that expresses a clear purpose (to celebrate, document, empower or inform an audience) and chosen context to communicate dramatic action and meaning around the theme of the human condition. One of the key conventions in the professional production of *Tiny Beautiful Things* will serve as a stimulus for your dramatic concept.

Your dramatic concept must organise information under the following headings:

- Analysis and evaluation (400 words)
- How effectively was the convention of a linear or non-linear performance style manipulated to contribute to the communication of a clear purpose and context

My Concept

(800 words, 10-12 images of dramatic action)

- In an introductory paragraph, identify a chosen purpose and context. Make specific reference to the original chosen convention of a linear or non-linear style.
- Make specific reference to the original chosen convention and other relevant conventions for this style.
- Argue how the dramatic languages have been used to communicate dramatic action and meaning.
- Develop a storyboard, using your peers to workshop key moments of staged dramatic action with explanatory paragraphs and annotations that document your dramatic ideas.



SCRIPT SECTION

EPISTLES #2

LETTER WRITER #2 Dear Sugar,
We still don't know who the hell you are and seriously, who the hell do you think you are? This week you're telling people to leave their marriages? Last week it was the opposite: you said don't have an affair; What are you trying to make us do?
Signed,
Not Buying It

SUGAR Dear Not Buying It, My goal isn't to make anyone do anything, I'm offering advice based on my personal experiences.

LETTER WRITER #1 Oh wow, did you just make this about you?

LETTER WRITER #3 Are you a therapist?

SUGAR No.

LETTER WRITER #1 Are you *in* therapy?

SUGAR No.

LETTER WRITER #3 Are you even qualified for this gig?

LETTER WRITER #2 Dear Sugar,
Your advice is all over the place! How can you suggest in one column that we stick to convention and then in the very next one say that we gotta be bold?! Make up your mind. Whatever. Why am I trying to figure out who you are, do you even know who you are? Make a choice. Pick a lane.
Signed,
Still Not Buying It

EPISTLES #4

LETTER WRITER #2 Dear Sugar –

LETTER WRITER #1 Dear Sugar –

LETTER WRITER #3 Dear Sugar –

LETTER WRITER #2 Dear Sugar –

LETTER WRITER #1 Dear Sugar –

LETTER WRITER #3 Dear Sugar –

LETTER WRITER #2 Dear Sugar, If it's true that drug addicts stop maturing at the time they started using, then the same thing happens at weddings!

LETTER WRITER #1 Dear Sugar, I am worried I will die alone.

LETTER WRITER #3 Dear Sugar, When it comes to holding down a job, I'm the worst.

LETTER WRITER #2 Dear Sugar, I think I'm attracted to my teacher.

LETTER WRITER #1 Dear Sugar, Are you there?

LETTER WRITER #2 Dear Sugar, Where are you?

LETTER WRITER #3 Dear Sugar, Why aren't you answering me?

LETTER WRITER #2 Dear Sugar, My roommate is selfish. Are you ever going to answer me?.



QUEENSLAND THEATRE