



SONG OF FIRST DESIRE

By **Andrew Bovell**

Directed by **Eamon Flack**

13 FEB - 23 MAR

LEARNING RESOURCES

BELVOIR ST. THEATRE PRESENTS

SONG OF FIRST DESIRE

Written by Andrew Bovell, Song of First Desire premiered in Madri at Octubre Productions in 2023. This production, directed by Neil Armfield, opened at Belvoir St Theatre on 19 February 2025.

CREATIVES

Director Neil Armfield

Writer Andrew Bovell

Set and Costume Designer Mel Page

Lighting Designer Morgan Moroney

Composer and Sound Designer Clemence Williams

Associate Sound Designer Madeleine Picard

Voice Coach Laura Farrell

Movement and Intimacy Director Nigel Poulton

Luke McGettigan Stage Manager

Assistant Stage Manager Jen Jackson

CAST

KERRY FOX Julia/Carmen

BORJA MAESTRE Alejandro/Juan

JORGE MURIEL Carlos/Luis

SARAH PEIRSE Camelia/Margarita

SUPPORTED BY Nelson Meers Foundation

We acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora nation who are the traditional custodians of the land on which Belvoir St. Theatre is built. We also pay respect to the Elders past, present and emerging, and all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

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ABOUT BELVOIR

ONE BUILDING.

SIX HUNDRED PEOPLE.

THOUSANDS OF STORIES

When the Nimrod Theatre building in Belvoir Street, Surry Hills, was threatened with redevelopment in 1984, more than 600 people – ardent theatre lovers together with arts, entertainment and media professionals – formed a syndicate to buy the building and save this unique performance space in inner city Sydney.

Thirty years later, under Artistic Director Eamon Flack and Executive Director Aaron Beach and Deputy Executive Director Fiona Hulton, Belvoir engages Australia's most prominent and promising playwrights, directors, actors and designers to realise an annual season of work that is dynamic, challenging and visionary. As well as performing at home, Belvoir regularly takes to the road, touring both nationally and internationally.

BELVOIR EDUCATION

Our Education Program offers students and teachers an in-depth look into the work of Belvoir St. and the theatre-making process.

Belvoir Education offers student workshops, teacher professional development workshops, work experience, VET placements, archival viewings, and a wealth of online resources designed to support work in the drama classroom. Our access programs assist schools in Regional NSW and Western Sydney to access the company's work. For keen theatre lovers, Young Belvoir provides enriching experiences, while First Class supports early-career drama teachers with targeted resources and training.

Explore our education pages at belvoir.com.au/education

CAST & CREATIVE TEAM



ANDREW BOVELL
Writer



NEIL ARMFIELD
Director



MEL PAGE
Set & Costume Designer



MORGAN MORONEY
Lighting Designer



CLEMENCE WILLIAMS
Composer & Sound Designer



MADELEINE PICARD
Associate Sound Designer



LAURA FARRELL
Voice Coach



NIGEL POULTON
Movement and, Intimacy Director



LUKE MCGETTIGAN
Stage Manager



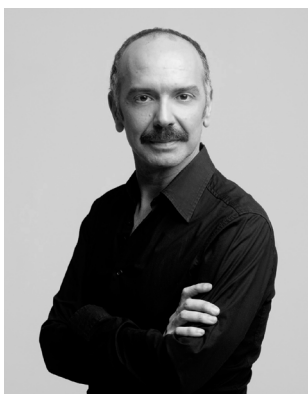
JEN JACKSON
Assistant Stage Manager



KERRY FOX
Julia/Carmen



BORJA MAESTRE
Alejandro/Juan



JORGE MURIEL
Carlos/Luis



SARAH PEIRSE
Camelia/Margarita

DIRECTOR'S NOTE | NEIL ARMFIELD

It's an honour to take on Andrew's new play, *Song of First Desire*. It's five years since our collaboration on his marvellous *Things I Know to Be True* (my last production for Belvoir) and it's thirteen years since we began work on a stage adaptation of Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*.

Writing a play from Australia about the inheritance of fascism in Spain might seem to be a massive reach, but Andrew's fractal poetics come from a place with its own history of forgetting, of silence, of lies erasing a shameful past. If Spain enacted its Pacto del Olvido (Pact of Forgetting) to try to bury the heinous crimes committed under Franco, in Australia we didn't need to - we already had the lie of Terra Nullius.

Since the Mabo and Wik decisions in the High Court, the last three decades have seen those lies exploded. But the forces of reaction have been hard at work.

Peter Dutton, the man who carries the greatest burden of responsibility for the silencing of the Voice, has begun to campaign as a strong leader who will unify the country under one flag.

We've heard it before. Beware.



Neil Armfield (2025, Photography by Brett Boardman)

WRITER'S NOTE | ANDREW BOVELL

PROGRAM

This work stems from my love affair with the city of Madrid.

TEXT

I met the translator and actor Jorge Muriel when he visited me in Adelaide in 2014. He had discovered the play *When the Rain Stops Falling*, whilst studying in New York. He showed it to the director, Julián Fuentes Reta and together with an ensemble of actors and theatre artists they mounted a production in Madrid in 2015. As well as translating the play, Jorge played the role of Gabriel Law and it was in preparing for the role that he travelled to Australia. Jorge followed the journey of the character from Adelaide to the Coorong to Uluru. At Uluru he collected a vial of red earth. Before every premiere of the production, they spread a little of this earth on the stage.

The Spanish production was a great success, winning many Spanish theatre awards, and impacting the Spanish theatre scene in a way I hadn't anticipated. The production gained a national tour in 2016 and the company invited me to join them for the premiere, as I hadn't been able to come the year before. I arrived in Madrid with my wife, Eugenia and we were immediately embraced by the company. I remember arriving at a restaurant at around 11pm, which is the customary time for dinner in Madrid, to be greeted by a table of 16 people. They rose as one and moved forward to embrace us. There were tears and declarations of love for the play and for me for having written it. We talked late into the night and into the next morning. I was overwhelmed by their warmth and passion. Julián and Jorge and the creative ensemble they gathered around this production have since become lifelong friends.

In 2019 they mounted a production of *Things I Know to be True*. The play was produced at Belvoir in the same year, directed by Neil. The two productions were incredibly different and yet each was very true to the play. It was a thrill to see it interpreted by two such different theatre cultures and by two directors I respected so much.

DESIGN

My relationship with the Spaniards and the city deepened during this time. I was learning the language, studying its history, walking its streets and discovering its secrets. Both *Rain* and *True* are Australian plays, and yet they had found a home and an audience in Madrid. It was about this time that we began to dream of a third work but this time it would be a new play and it would tell a story about Spain.

We began with a simple question. What is the thing you are most afraid to talk about? Universally, the answer was The Civil War and my response was, then this is what we must talk about. The reasons my collaborators didn't want to make the play about the war are complex and varied. Some want to break free from that history and feel that it has defined Spain, particularly to the rest of the world, for too long. Others did not want to go there because they understood that the wounds were still deep and the ideological animosities that divided Spain then, continue to do so.

PRODUCTION

As a way to begin I asked each member of the company to tell me a story about their grandparents. This process took us back to the time of the war through their personal family histories. It was not an easy task, as many of the stories were about great suffering and trauma. They also reawakened political animosities that existed within families and between generations. Others had to confront their grandparent's silence and refusal to discuss the past at all. Some even admitted to feeling degrees of shame about a grandparent's actions during the war. They were brave and generous in sharing these stories with me. I was struck how this history, this pain, this trauma remains unresolved and continues to impact contemporary Spain. One of the recurring themes of my work, seen in plays like *Rain*, *Holy Day* and *The Secret River* is how the unresolved trauma of the past is carried by future generations, how the secrets of the past continue to impact our lives. It became a central theme of this play, too.

MEDIA

The concept of *Dos Espana* or *Two Spains* emerged as central, in which two opposites and contradictory understandings of Spain exist side by side. Both true and yet both denying the other. Catholic and Conservative Spain vs Secular and Progressive Spain. But it goes further. A patriarchal culture that continues to be defined by its machismo is equally matched by the strength of its women and the instrumental and sometimes subversive roles they played in the Civil War, on both sides and have continued to play in Spanish society since.

This idea of *Dos Espana* is embodied in the two-time frames of the play through the twins, Luis and Julia in the contemporary story, brother and sister, born from the same womb, constantly at war and through the relationship between the women Margarita and Carmen in 1968, two women from opposite political sides, who find common cause and purpose in the final moments of the play.

As our research continued, our focus began to shift from the Civil War to the Francoist period that followed it. I became fascinated by the period of “the white terror” (1939-45) in which the victorious Franco cemented his regime by systematically arresting and murdering anyone perceived to oppose him. Republicans, Socialists, trade unionists, intellectuals, artists, teachers, workers were taken from their homes and summarily executed and buried in mass graves. It is said that there is only one regime in twentieth century history that directly murdered more of its own people than Franco’s Spain and that was Pol Pot. This astonishing fact made it clear to me the extent of the national trauma that Spain endured and the depths of the wounds it still carried. There is a line in the play “The victory was already yours but still you filled our mouths with dirt”. This climate of fear and repression continued in Spain for the next three decades.

Following the death of Franco in 1975, Spain entered into a formal agreement called the *Pacto del Olvido* (The Pact of Forgetting), in which all political parties agreed not to discuss the past. The result was that no one was held to account for the violence and repression, no one was prosecuted for the murders and rapes, “the missing” were never recovered and no one was allowed to tell their story. Spain was determined to put its fascist past behind it in order to become a modern democracy and so a silence descended upon the people, which was simply another form of repression. Juan, a character from the play asks his mother, Margarita “Why do you never speak of the past?” “To protect you from it”, she answers. “But you’ve only left me with silence”, he says, in response.

This silence resonates with our own history. We did not enter into a formal agreement but we, being white Australia, tacitly agreed that past wrongs would not be discussed and that responsibility would not be taken for the dispossession of indigenous lands and the suffering that followed. Well might I talk about Two Spains but there continues to be Two Australias divided by our view of the past and the actions each seeks to take in response.

Like here, the past remains deeply contentious in Spain. In 2019, after years of divisive debate, Franco’s body was removed from the “Valley of the Fallen”, the mausoleum he had built before his death. The site had become a point of focus for the rallying of right-wing movements, on the rise throughout Europe. His body was reburied in a humble grave in the village where he was born. Such an action is symbolic of Spain’s determination not to glorify its fascist past. The bodies of those murdered during his regime are also in the process of being exhumed, identified through DNA and returned to their respective families, so they can be buried with respect. This is indicative of Spain’s desire to build a “culture of memory” as an antidote to the “pact of forgetting” that preceded it.

The act of remembering is crucial to the play, and becomes a subversive act in itself in a society that has been told to forget. It opens on the image of an old woman struggling to remember a childhood poem and closes on her triumphant recall. All that happens in the play, takes place between this moment of forgetting and remembering.



Andrew Bovell (2025, Photography by Brett Boardman)

The play premiered in Madrid in 2023 in this period of reckoning and healing. It was met, as we expected with contentious debate with some challenging the right of an outsider to depict the sensitivities of Spanish history and others claiming that only an outsider could do so, with a degree of objectivity.

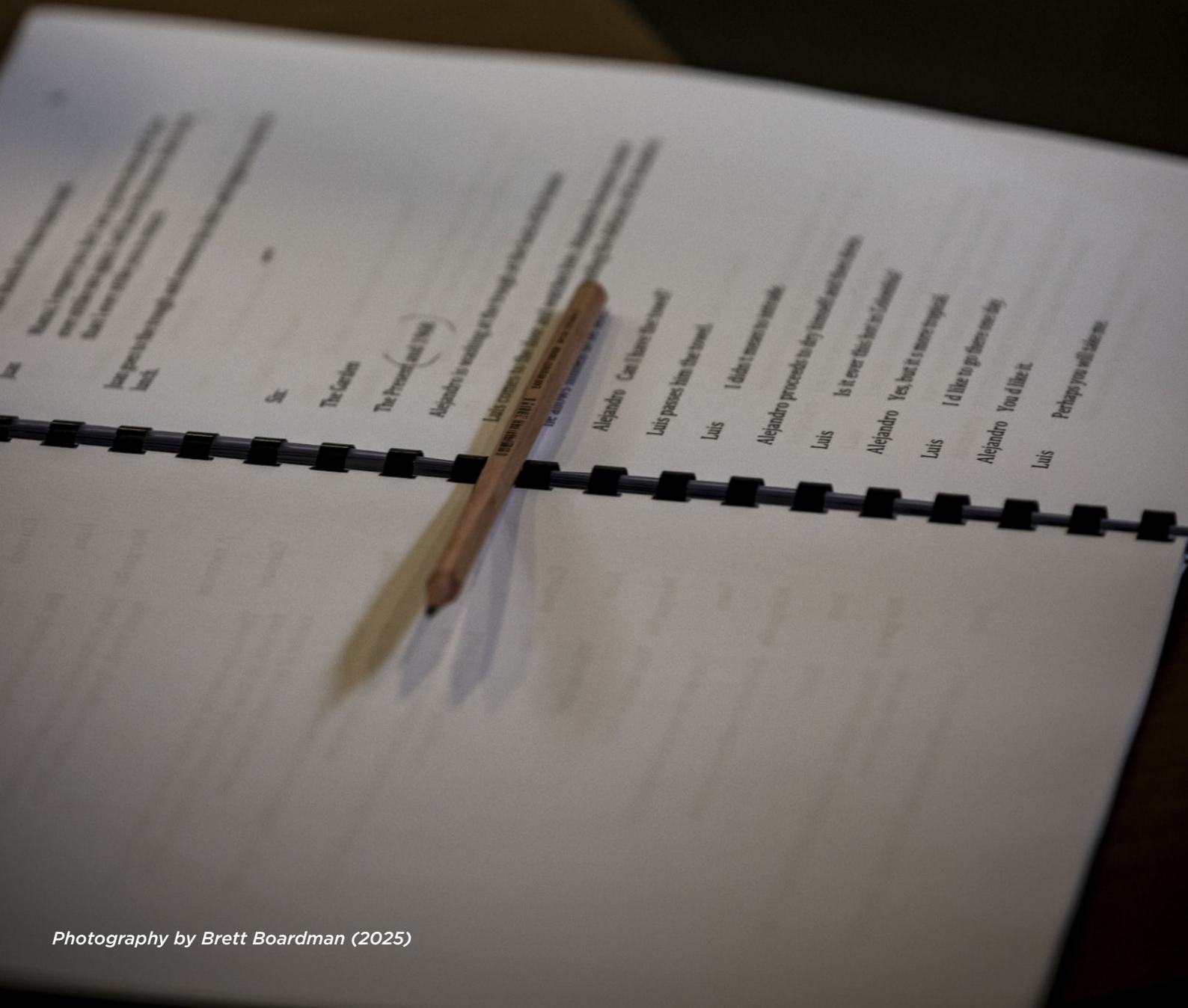
It is a great privilege to be invited to walk through another people's story. I could only do so with the collaboration of my Spanish camaradas and camarados, Julián Fuentes Reta, who directed it and the actors, Jorge Muriel and Borja Maestra who have joined the Belvoir cast and Pilar Gomez and Consuelo Trujillo, who watch from afar.

I had hoped that one day I would see a production in my own country and in my own language. I owe my thanks to Eamon Flack and the Belvoir team who have made that possible with a spirit of adventure and risk and to my old friend and comrade, Neil Armfield who stepped into the role of director at late notice and who has led us through a fascinating rehearsal process, bringing the Spanish actors together with two actors I have wanted to work with for a long time, Sarah Peirse and Kerry Fox.

At the close of the Civil War, Dolores Ibárruri, the renown Communist leader, known as La Passionara, marched through the streets of Madrid, as Franco's forces advanced upon city, rallying the people with the cry "No Pasarán". (They will not pass). "Resist. Resist" she cried.

Song of First Desire, gently urges us to continue to do so.

Andrew Bovell



So:

The Garden

The Present (and 1986)

Alejandro is waiting at the trough of the sea of flowers

Luis comes to the shore and watches him. Alejandro is waiting for Luis to come.

Alejandro

Can I have the towel?

Luis passes him the towel.

Luis

I didn't mean to invade.

Alejandro proceeds to dry himself with the towel.

Luis

Is it ever this hot in Jamaica?

Alejandro

Yes, but it's more tropical.

Luis

I'd like to go there one day.

Alejandro

You'd like it.

Luis

Perhaps you will take me.

CHARACTERS

The play is set across two time periods: 1968 and the present. It features four actors—Kerry Fox, Borja Maestre, Jorge Muriel, and Sarah Peirse—each portraying two characters, one from 1968 and one from the present. Throughout the production, some scenes transition non-naturalistically, seamlessly blending into the next. This often involves shifts between the two time periods without any clear break or boundary separating them. The eight characters in the play present a complex web of relationships, represented on the next page in a relationship chart.

CHARACTERS IN 1968



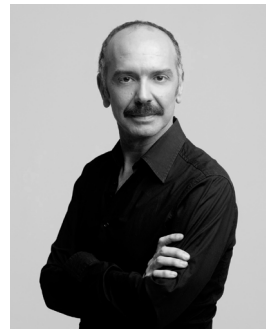
MARGARITA



JUAN



CARMEN



CARLOS

CHARACTERS IN THE PRESENT



CAMELIA



ALEJANDRO

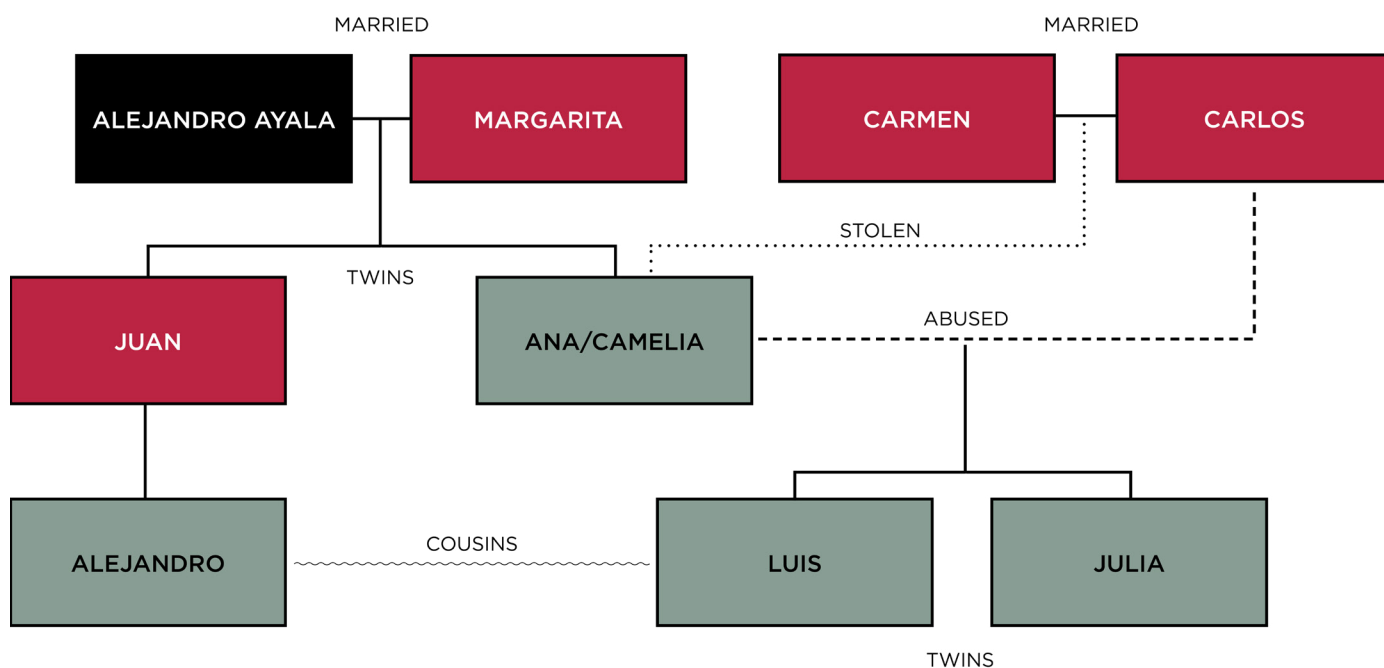


JULIA



LUIS

- What challenges might an actor face when portraying two roles within the same production?
- How can audiences be guided to clearly differentiate between two characters played by the same actor?



PRESENT DAY CHARACTERS

1968 CHARACTERS



Cast in rehearsals (2025, Photography by Brett Boardman)

PRODUCTION ELEMENTS

The elements of production are the technical and visual elements used to manipulate the elements of drama in order to effectively tell a play's story. In these notes we are going to look at the costume and set design for *Song of First Desire*.

COSTUME DESIGNER

DESIGNER'S NOTE | MEL PAGE

I would describe my process as highly collaborative and often quite organic, responding to discoveries from the rehearsal room. One of the things I love about theatre is working with all the artists — the director, the performers, and the technical teams — to shape and create the story and storytelling.

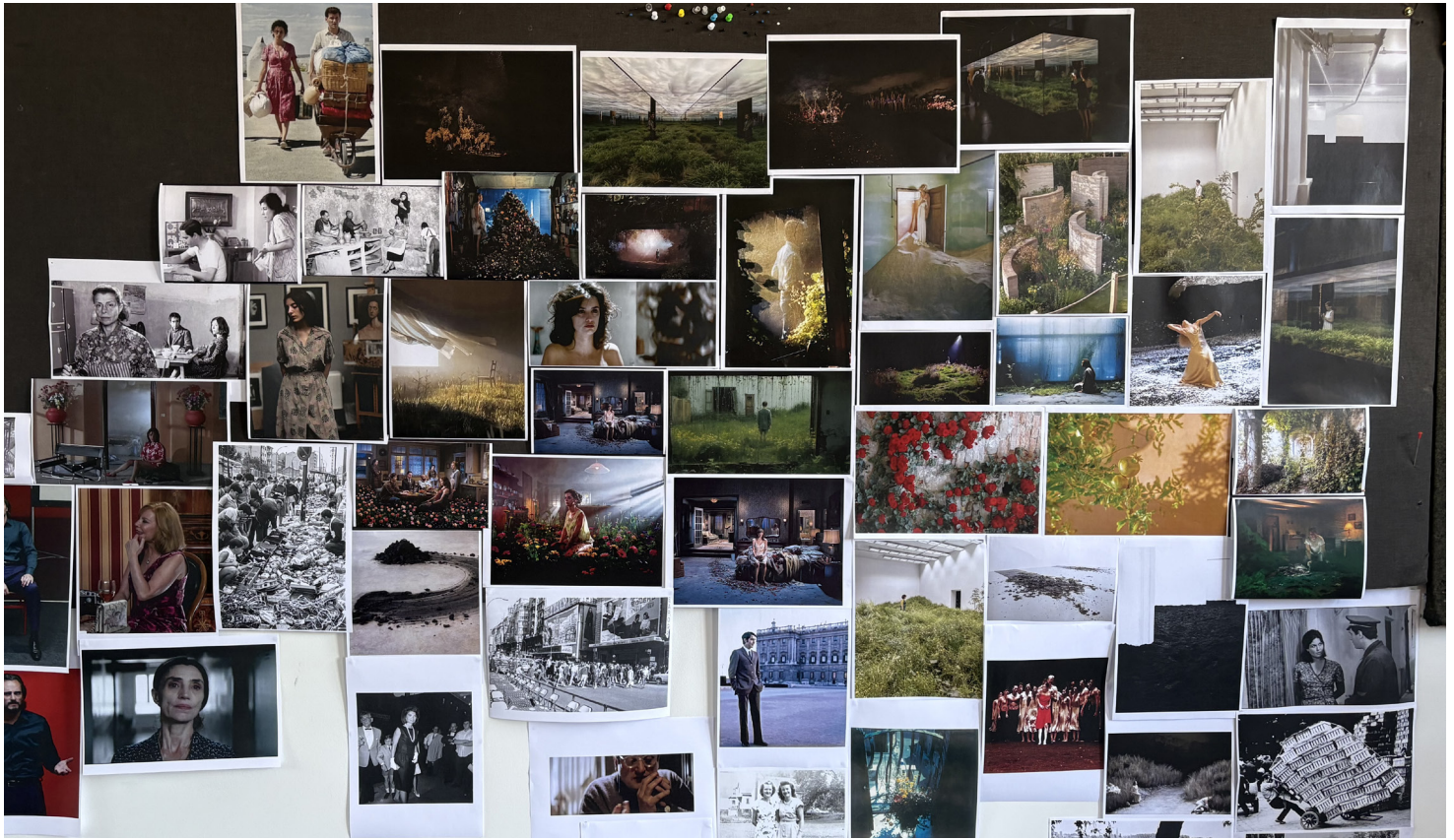
Sometimes I don't produce complete costume renderings, often because a performer brings their own thoughts and feelings about what their character might wear or look like. When we work together to integrate our ideas during fittings and throughout the rehearsal process, the costumes become more like clothes — more real and embodied.

In lieu of costume drawings, I use many references from film, photographers, artists, and everyday life. Sometimes an image may convey a feeling I encountered from reading the script or something more specific, like an item of clothing or a hairstyle, that I can discuss with the cast and creative team to convey how I imagine the world of the costumes. It is always helpful to refer back to the mood board, which is often printed and displayed on the rehearsal room wall so that everyone can continue developing their ideas around the visual landscape we started with.



Mel Page (2025, Photography by Brett Boardman)

Have a look at Mel Page's mood board, erected in the Upstairs Rehearsal Room at Belvoir St Theatre. What words would you use to describe the images she has collected? Can you detect a particular colour palette or tone?



SET DESIGNER

MEL PAGE





Along with the costumes, Mel Page also designed the set for *Song of First Desire*. Take a close look at the model box she created.

1. What key design elements stand out to you?
2. How does this set create a specific mood or atmosphere?
3. What challenges might come with working on a set like this?
4. What makes the shape of Belvoir's Upstairs Theatre unique, and how might it influence set design?

IMAGES OF THE SET IN PRODUCTION

SET DESIGNER | MEL PAGE



(2025, by Brett Boardman)



Borja Maestre and Jorge Muriel (2025, by Brett Boardman)



Borja Maestre and Jorge Muriel (2025, by Brett Boardman)



(2025, by Brett Boardman)

- In what ways is the set different to the original model box design?
- Was there anything that surprised you about how the actors used the set?

REHEARSING: SONG OF FIRST DESIRE

PROGRAM

TEXT

DESIGN

PRODUCTION

MEDIA



Kerry Fox and Borja Maestre (2025, Brett Boardman)

- Describe what you see in the photo above.
- What do you think is happening in this moment of the play?



Borja Maestre and Sarah Peirse (2025, Brett Boardman)

- Describe what you see in the photo above.
- What do you think the mood or atmosphere is in this scene?



Borja Maestre (2024, Brett Boardman)



Cast in rehearsal room (2025, Brett Boardman)

- Aside from learning their lines, what else might an actor use their script for in rehearsals?
- Why is it helpful to have elements of the set in the rehearsal room?



Borja Maestre and Jorge Muriel (2025, by Brett Boardman)

- What do you think is happening in this moment?
- What might be the relationship between these two characters?

POST SHOW DISCUSSION

PROGRAM

TEXT

DESIGN

PRODUCTION

MEDIA



Borja Maestre and Sarah Peirse (2025, Brett Boardman)

How did this production make you feel?



Sarah Peirse, Jorge Muriel, Kerry Fox and Borja Maestre (2025, Photography by Brett Boardman)

Which character did you feel most connected to in the show?



Kerry Fox, Jorge Muriel, Sarah Peirse, and Borja Maestre (2025, Photography by Brett Boardman)

What do you think this play is saying about the world we live in?



Sarah Peirse (2025, Photography by Brett Boardman)

Which scene was most shocking to you as an audience member?



(2025, by Brett Boardman)



BELVOIR BRIEFING | LIVESTREAM RECORDING

Get the inside scoop from cast and creatives involved in creating *Song of First Desire* at the Belvoir Briefing on 7 Feb 2025.

WATCH NOW



INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR

Listen to writer Andrew Bovell introduce *Song of First Desire* as part of Belvoir's 2025 Season Launch.

WATCH NOW



SMH ARTICLE

Read an article from the Sydney Morning Herald where Neil Armfield and Kerry Fox discuss the characters and ideas in Andrew Bovell's play.

READ NOW



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