



IN THE COMPANY OF ACTORS

A Shark Island Productions Film

www.inthecompanyofactors.com

A **STUDYGUIDE** BY MARGUERITE O'HARA



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IN THE COMPANY OF ACTORS

*From a rehearsal room in Sydney,
through to opening night in New York,
a company of actors reveals the magic
and struggle of creating theatre.*

Introduction

In the Company of Actors is a documentary featuring an ensemble of Australia's finest actors, Cate Blanchett, Hugo Weaving, Anthony Weigh, Justine Clarke, Aden Young, Julie Hamilton and Annie Byron, as they prepare to perform the Sydney Theatre Company's production of *Hedda Gabler* at the prestigious Brooklyn Academy of Music in New York. The film follows the rehearsal process over a period of five weeks as the cast and crew prepare for opening night in New York. The film runs for seventy-five minutes.

Within the world of theatre, the rehearsal room is a sacred space, the private domain where boundaries are pushed, risks are taken, mistakes made, vulnerabilities exposed and, at its very best, magic created. It is not a place into which the public is often, if ever, invited. In raw and intimate detail the film takes the audience into the room to observe the actors immersed in the creative process. We discover that presenting a seemingly effortless performance is a complex, detailed, technical and exhaustive process, with the director and writer and their teams of artists and technicians working at high levels of intensity. As we enter their world, we feel and understand their deeply ingrained love of theatre and their passion for telling stories.

The Director of the play, Robyn Nevin, is a perfectionist, paying great attention to every detail, every word is analysed and questioned, every move and gesture blocked until perfect. In a bold departure from tradition, Nevin

has commissioned a new and modern interpretation of the play from Australian writer Andrew Upton. How will a reputedly sophisticated and highly critical New York audience receive this adaptation in an Australian voice?

After three weeks in the sweltering heat of the Sydney rehearsal room, the cast and crew fly out to New York, to the bitter cold of a Brooklyn winter. The actors have only two weeks left in which to hone their performances in new and unfamiliar surroundings, before exposing their own version of Henrik Ibsen's classic.

In the Company of Actors observes the highly collaborative nature of theatre as the production gradually takes shape. The production itself becomes a major character in the film, as it is pushed and pulled from all creative directions.

Opening night looms closer. The intensity increases. As their five-minute call is announced over the dressing room speaker, the actors scramble for their positions in the

wings. The house lights go down. The actors are ready. The Stage Manager calls her first direction:

'Sound cue one ... And Cate ... Go.'

Curriculum Relevance

In the Company of Actors is suitable for middle and senior secondary students of English, Literature, Drama, Theatre Studies and Performance, Media and Film Studies, as well as students studying acting and/or Theatre Studies at tertiary level.

The documentary offers a wonderfully accessible and engrossing insight into the nature of a theatrical production, as well as showing the audience something of the complexity of staging a play like Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*. It explores the ways in which a play is different to other types of literature and how it only comes alive on the stage each time it is performed for an audience.

While this film is about the process involved in preparing for the performing of *Hedda Gabler*, it will be of equal interest to students who are not familiar with this play, as the focus of the film is on the preparation for staging any play.

My objective was to make a documentary that would demystify the process of creating theatre. Like any production, theatre evolves over time, and my aim was to capture this gradual evolution on film from the initial rehearsal process through to opening night.

Ian Darling,
Director and Producer of
In the Company of Actors

About the play

Hedda Gabler was written by Henrik Ibsen, a Norwegian playwright, in 1890. It was first staged in Munich, Germany that same year. It was not well received initially – the critics found nothing but an 'enigmatic'



and 'incomprehensible' female character. There was 'no suggestion of social reform, nothing edifying, no obvious symbolism'. The critics outdid each other in condemning the chief character. In the newspaper *Morgenbladet*, Alfred Sinding-Larsen wrote:

*All in all, Hedda Gabler can hardly be called anything but a sinister creature of the imagination, the author's own creation of a monster in the shape of a woman, without any corresponding model in the real world.*¹

Since then, the play has been performed in many languages in different countries. It was first translated into English in 1891 by Edmund Gosse. Today, when the play is performed in English, the most commonly used translation is the 1950 Penguin translation by Una Ellis-Fermor.

Ibsen had been writing since 1849, and became well known after joining the Den Nationale Scene, a new national theatre where he worked for seven years. He went on to become Artistic Director of Christiania's Norwegian Theatre. After leaving Norway on a grant in 1864 he lived abroad until his return to Norway to reside in 1891. Most of the plays from his later period of writing reflect social issues and concerns. The initial social controversy sparked by *Hedda Gabler* subsided in the mid 1900's but it has continued to be performed, initiating debate and interest in Hedda as a woman and the social expectations of women through the last century.

It is an intense drama in four acts about an unhappily married woman, Hedda, who is unable to escape the conventional life she has chosen to create for herself. Her restlessness

and boredom with her life, coupled with her own desire to live fully, ends in tragedy for both herself and her family and friends. She both longs for life and is afraid of it. Hedda has frequently been seen as a woman trapped in a society where marriage was the only way of achieving social recognition and financial security. As an only child who seems to have been raised by her Father, Hedda does not slip into the socially expected roles of the time.

The period in which the play is set (the 1890s) was a time when middle-class and aristocratic women generally did not work outside the home, but had maids and servants to cook and clean the house. Women were expected to play a subservient role to their husband's more outward looking life and career. Sexual abstinence was the only form of reliable birth control.



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During the course of the play Hedda describes herself as 'bored' several times. Hedda is married to Jorgen Tesman in the play and Gabler is her maiden name. About the title, Ibsen wrote that his intention was to indicate that Hedda as a personality is to be regarded as her father's daughter, rather than her husband's wife.

Many famous actors have played Hedda, including Ingrid Bergman, Diana Rigg, Isabelle Huppert, Glenda Jackson, Fiona Shaw, Maggie Smith and Judy Davis. Like Blanchett, many of these actresses are as well known for their screen performances as their stage roles.

The play is sometimes performed in versions where the place, period and setting are updated to emphasise more contemporary concerns about women's lack of choices and opportunities for self-expression.

See <http://www.ibsen.net> for a continuing listing of where the play is being performed around the world.

The Sydney Theatre Company's production of *Hedda Gabler*

In 2004, the Sydney Theatre Company staged *Hedda Gabler* in the Wharf I theatre in Sydney. The production was invited to perform eighteen months later at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) in New York. This documentary follows the original cast and crew during the five weeks of rehearsal and restaging of *Hedda Gabler* in 2006.

The production shown in this film is set in the period in which it was written, though Andrew Upton has adapted the text from a literal translation of the original work. In his introduction to his script

(Currency Press, 2004) he explains the process of 'uncovering' the drama and updating the text and he explains why he has done this during the documentary.

The emphasis in the original is she's petrified of scandal which just doesn't hold that much water anymore. And you can set the play back in the time that it's set, as Robyn did, but if the audience aren't aware of how dire her situation is, then it's just a woman playing games with other people.

Andrew Upton,
Writer and Adaptor

The website <http://www.inthecompanyofactors.com> contains the original study guide for the play with further information about the text and adaptation.



Student Activities:

Activity I

Pre-viewing discussion

Lower to Middle Secondary

1. What is a documentary?
2. In small groups, discuss: how is a play a different kind of text to a novel, a short story or poem. How is a play different to a film?

Students should be encouraged to think about form, structure, the nature of an audience and the concepts of transformation of text. Use examples relevant to students. For example younger students may be familiar with the Harry Potter books and have seen their film equivalents. Older students may have studied Macbeth as a text and seen the Polanski film version.

In small groups, summarise your discussion into several key points and share them with the class.

3. Have you, or has someone you know, ever been part of a stage production, either as a member of the cast or crew? What was the best part of this experience?
4. In groups create a Mind Map of as many personnel as you can who are involved in creating a theatre production. Note down what their key activities are and how their role is vital to the creation of the production. If you are unsure of particular roles research them on the internet.

Middle to Upper Secondary

5. Think about the different ways a theatre production can be presented. If you have previously seen live theatre productions think back to what affected you. Describe your responses and consider what elements created this reaction in you. For example was it the story, a particular character, a particular actor, the music, the set.
6. What do you understand by the term 'ensemble production'?
7. What is a documentary? What makes a good documentary?



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Post-viewing Questions

Lower to Middle Secondary

After watching *In The Company Of Actors* students (using their summaries from question 2 and Mind Maps) compare their initial responses with:

1. What the people in the film described as the differences between texts and live performance. How was this similar or different to their initial perceptions?
2. Were there any roles involved in creating the production discovered in the film that you had not previously realised? How was that role vital? Review the Company credits at the back of this kit.
3. Think about how the creative personnel decided to present *Hedda Gabler*. What type of theatre was it and how was this conveyed to the audience? Why were these particular decisions made? Who made them?

Middle to Upper Secondary

1. Several plays written through history are labeled 'a classic'.
 - a. Make a list of up to five plays you consider to be classics.
For example: Ibsen, Shakespeare, Brecht, Sophocles. OR present students with a list of classic and non-classic plays. Students select one play they think is a classic and share the reasons for their selection over others.
 - b. Summarise the discussion by generating a list of qualities students attribute to a classic text. For example: performed in many countries, languages, historical significance, duration of the play, impact on theatrical style.
 - c. Is it possible and/or desirable to read a play and study it as a text, separate from a staged or acted performance? How important is the context of the spoken word rather than the read? How do we separate production values and performance?
2. Referencing the film *In The Company of Actors*, what are the essential differences between portraying a character on screen as part of a film and performing the role in a theatre over a three-week season? Add to this what you see as the differences for audiences in seeing a play and seeing a film.

Also look beyond the obvious of having live performers in the same space as you, into the roles mentioned in the film, of editors controlling what the audience sees and hears.

3. What were some of the challenges for cast and crew in taking the production of *Hedda Gabler* to New York?
4. How important is an audience to a live theatre production? Reference the film *In The Company of Actors*.
5. If you are interested in pursuing a career as an actor or in some other job related to the stage and theatre, what qualities do you think you need to develop to be successful in this field?

Activity 2 – Film and Media Studies courses

Following the rehearsal process on film

This is a film about the process of creating theatre. As we watch the film we are also watching the rehearsal process leading to the performance of *Hedda Gabler* in New York in 2006. Part of the interest of this documentary is in observing this ‘double’ creative process of filmmaking and theatrical production.

After watching the film you could share your insights into how the process works. As you watch the film, there are a number of areas on which to focus. Each student or group of students could be allocated, or select from, one or more of the following ‘focuses for close viewing’ on Table 1 (below) on which to focus their attention. Take notes using the headings suggested in the chart.

Table 1

Focus for close viewing	The part played in providing insights into the process of creating theatre	How does this person/sequence help shape the film?
1. Robyn Nevin – Director of <i>Hedda Gabler</i>		
2. Cate Blanchett – Hedda Gabler, the central character in the play		
3. Justine Clarke – Thea Elvsted, Hedda’s friend		
4. Anthony Weigh – Jorgen Tesman, Hedda’s husband		
5. Aden Young – Ejlert Lovburg		
6. Hugo Weaving – Judge Brack, Hedda’s confidante		
7. Julie Hamilton – Julle Tesman, Jorgen’s aunt, and Annie Byron – Berte, the Tesman’s servant.		
8. Informal moments during the rehearsal process between the cast and with crew.		
9. Opening sequences before and after the main credits.		
10. Set Design and Designer		
11. Lighting Design and Designer		
12. Costume Design		
13. Music and other sounds in the play		
14. Shots of Sydney and New York and their part in the film		
15. The role of the student audience invited to the New York dress rehearsal		

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Activity 3 – Theatre Studies, Drama and English courses

What the cast and crew of the play say about their work

During the ‘talking head’ sections in this film, which are skillfully intercut with the rehearsal sequences, both actors and crew offer personal insights into the creative processes involved in staging a play. Here are some of these observations taken from the film’s post-production script. The excerpts have been grouped together under five different headings (although there is some overlap). The speaker is identified after each quote. Choose several of them and discuss how they shed light on:

- Creating theatre
- Staging and directing *Hedda Gabler* in 2006
- Adapting a play
- Interpreting a part
- Other key roles

Creating Theatre

Much of the director’s work is in making space for, giving permission for people to explore very personally and in the space without stamping on them and I can be, I’m very, very pedantic about language. Extremely pedantic about language and the rhythm of the language, the music of the language.

Robyn Nevin,
Artistic Director of the STC and
Director of *Hedda Gabler*

One of the great joys about revisiting this play, coming back here a year and a half later ... is working with exactly the same cast, because we have been able to find all sorts of things that we didn’t even find the first time round with a ten-week run.

Hugo Weaving,
Actor playing Judge Brack.

Theatre is not literature; it’s theatre ... a living, breathing thing that doesn’t have a static notion of the truth. There is no static Hedda, no static Tesman; it’s what this group of actors, this ensemble with the writer and the director and the lighting designer and the costume designer etc, what they put on in this moment. It’s a temporal thing and hopefully it will live on in your memories, but the sense of it being done correctly or incorrectly? ...

Cate Blanchett,
Actor playing Hedda Gabler

One of the great things theatre can do, it’s fantastic, is there’s a moment, there’s like an ‘a ha’ moment when the audience goes, ‘we’re the same.’

Anthony Weigh,
Actor playing Jorgen Tesman

I had learned the dialogue within the first two days and Robyn said to me, what are you doing? You don’t need to. You’ve got the freedom of six weeks, and that to me was baffling because on film of course, you don’t have that rehearsal process.

Aden Young,
Actor playing Ejlert Lovburg

What the theatre asks of you is that you engage. It’s a form that does not exist

without an audience. You can rehearse a play, and until it goes in front of an audience, it’s nothing.

Andrew Upton,
Writer and Adaptor

Staging and directing *Hedda Gabler* in 2006

It’s a very famous play ... I know, I’ve played Hedda ... and people always ask me, have you looked at other productions and how do you feel about the history of all the great actresses that have played it, and I just say ... I don’t even want to think about it. It’s irrelevant ... because you always start again. Day one, in the rehearsal room on the floor with the people you’re working with, that’s the project you’re working with ... everything else goes out the window.

Robyn Nevin

You know we’d known each other for quite some time so it was, it was a very comfortable place to work in. Yet at the same time, you had to make it a bit uncomfortable in order to find out was that going to work or wasn’t that going to work. And I, I was a bit cautious about that.

Aden Young

Coming into a room with the actors who’d performed this eighteen months earlier, for the first few days I would say it was quite artificial because we weren’t starting at the beginning, we were starting at the end. We were starting at an end point, which was the point at which they’d left it.

Robyn Nevin

So, we’re going to a much bigger venue with twenty metres of space overhead, so the set, as it was, would have just

looked ridiculous. So they had to, Fiona had to, redesign it to give it some serious impact. So, it was much higher and much more imposing and it actually filled the space, the proscenium opening.

Eric Duffy,
Senior Mechanist

I'm the person who goes, well that's in the right place, that's in the right place, that's in the right place, that's in the right place and therefore the framework is there. And any kind of play within the framework is completely creative.

Mary Macrae,
Stage Manager

He came in to design for Hedda. He was very excited about this, it's a play he loves. He felt very strongly about the character. He understood her completely. We both agreed that she'd shopped in Paris. So that there would be nothing modest about her clothes at all. In fact there was, they were clothes befitting her status as the aristocratic daughter of General Gabler.

Robyn Nevin, speaking
about Kristian Fredrikson,
Costume Designer.

Adapting a play

The emphasis in the original is that Hedda is petrified of scandal, which doesn't hold that much water anymore. And you can set the play back in the time that it's set, as Robyn did, but if the audience isn't aware of how dire her situation is, then it's just a woman playing games with other people ... so I weighted the play to be more about entrapment ... so there's a line which is something like 'there's nothing more isolating than being trapped in someone else's life' ... that's a line that I wrote that is not in the Ibsen, and there's not even a sense of being there in the Ibsen.

Andrew Upton

He [Upton] added ... simultaneous and overlapping dialogue which is a distinct characteristic of Andrew's writing which I respond to very strongly because it's the way we all speak.

Robyn Nevin

Most of the great plays are about identity. That's why they're named after the central character, Hedda Gabler, King Lear, Macbeth, Oedipus Rex, etc., because they're in some way about the identity of the individual in society which is a vital, vital question that ... we all face every day ... what do I compromise in order to live better?

Andrew Upton

I really wanted to do it because his adaptation seemed to me to be, well, well it was exciting because it seemed both contemporary and it, and it seemed to draw out the essential elements of the original piece.

Hugo Weaving

Andrew is constantly evolving the work. ... Having a new adaptation reinforces the fact that you are going to re-examine every word, every moment, every scene and that nothing is set in stone.

Cate Blanchett



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He's brought both women into this century so that women, when they see it, and men too, can relate to that, can relate to these characters now, even though, you know, the themes of the play are still, you know, steeped in, in the period. All, all the characters, I think, have modern dilemmas.

Justine Clark,
Actor playing Thea Elvsted

Interpreting a part

... I think there's no such thing as character ... I remember being at drama school and being told to write big lists of my character's qualities. Well, I couldn't write you a list of my qualities! I'm different in each moment depending on what's going on. So I think that's a real furrphy, developing a character ... I think you play each moment as honestly as you can and the audience then creates the character in their mind.

Anthony Weigh

Not everyone will really understand Hedda's idealism ... it's tempered by an enormous destructive nature but she is an idealist who is also a coward ... she's incredibly passionate ... but then also incredibly cold.

Cate Blanchett.

When I'm watching a production, I'll watch the person who's listening rather than the person who's talking ... I think that's the key to a really good actor ... if they're investing in the mental process of listening and understanding and processing what's being said, they're completely riveting to watch.

Robyn Nevin

Plays are meant to be performed.

Hedda really made little sense to me on the page. It was in the saying of it, in the inhabiting of it, having people witness it that suddenly it makes sense.

Cate Blanchett

I try not to think about, about things too much, often thought gets in the way of a particular truth with a character. I generally find the doing of something, the, the exploration of something through the physical doing of it can help you to feel what that truth is at that particular moment, which is why, the more I'm up on my feet with other actors and exploring things, that's when I'm hopefully finding whatever that truth is.

Hugo Weaving

Other Key Roles

As a composer, you try to find a hook to kind of hang the music on ... and try to find a kind of colour or a pallet for the music. There's this unseen character in the play which is Hedda's father, the General. And you can see the whole play is very much set in Hedda's battlefield ... so in the scene changes there's a lot of very kind of marshal music and a lot of trumpet and drums ... kind of like what's raging in Hedda's head.

Alan John,
Composer

We started talking about the social situation, women of the time and working out how to represent that in what is actually quite, quite a specific world. I just started looking at what I

wanted to represent and it was basically creating ... a beautiful cage.

Fiona Crombie,
Set Designer

We wanted to create something that could simultaneously feel very fragile, very sparse, and very open. Therefore an awful lot of windows ... so you end up with a very fragile, febrile structure not unlike the idea of a bird in the cage. That space ... if you light it differently, can begin to feel very claustrophobic, very cloying and quite intense. You go from the space being physically opened out ... huge amounts of light fall through into the space. By the time you reach the end of Act Three, you never see beyond those walls again.

Nick Schlieper,
Lighting Designer

I'm the person who calls the cues and makes sure everything is in the right place.

Mary Macrae

Richard Eyre [Director of the Royal National Theatre in London from 1988-1997 and now a film director] once said, 'We go to the theatre as individuals and leave as an audience' ... You bring to it whatever you're feeling on the day and it brings whatever it's doing on the day and impacts on you so you're feeding each other; an extraordinary contract between the living breathing mass that is the audience and the living breathing component that is the acting group.

Robyn Nevin

Activity 4 – English, Drama, Film and Media Studies courses

The role of story-telling in your culture

In what ways do we engage in storytelling?

- Identify and list types of participant storytelling students are aware of.

Consider the oral traditions of Indigenous communities, the written and oral histories of ancient civilisations, medieval roaming storytellers, religious storytelling etc.

- How does documentary story telling have a different impact to fictional storytelling? How might documentary be different to reality television?
- Tell your story: If you were to have a film crew follow you in your life for a week, what subjects would arise? What people would they encounter? How would the influences of where you live, the things you believe

in and experiences you have had be portrayed to reflect what or who you are? Keep a journal for a week or more detailing the day-to-day activities you participate in and the people you meet. At the end of the week, imagine you have footage of all those experiences. Edit the material into an outline for your film.

Consider devices like interviews, narration, observational filming and the influences you can exert by your editing choices.

- Make a documentary about yourself or your friends: Create a short documentary about one of your experiences in your community, whether that be school, work, within a group of friends or an organisation. To give yourself a focal point to work around, choose a subject you have access to material about. It may be a school issue, a community issue or an experience like drought, a change in your beliefs in something and

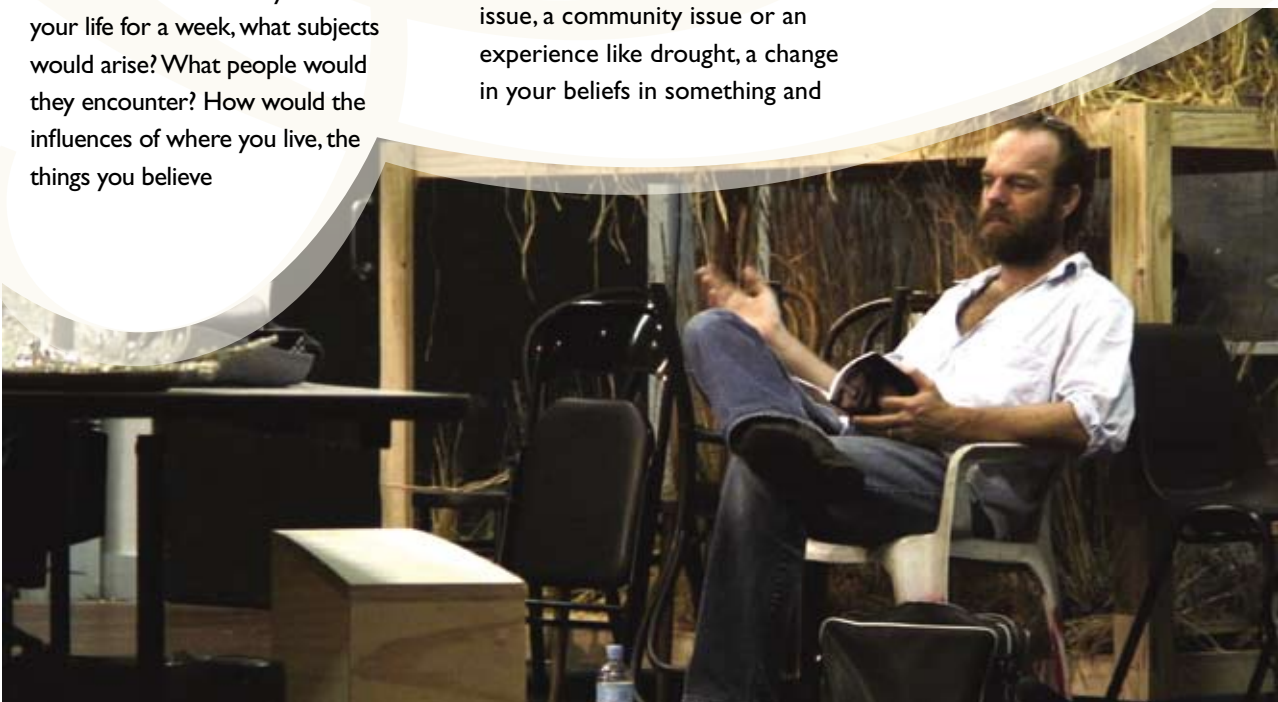
how that change came about, or a change in the circumstances of your life.

The value of sharing culture

What do students consider to be Australian culture?

- Discuss whether it is important to share Australian culture globally. What or who do they see as culturally important to Australia and worth 'exporting'?
- Brainstorm a list of cultural ambassadors and the contribution students see them making to Australian culture and the building of the global impression of our culture.

Consider sports and sports personalities, visual arts and artists, musicians, personalities (including politicians), films, drama and literature.



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- How do documentary films like *In The Company Of Actors* compare with fictional films like *Crocodile Dundee* (Peter Faiman, 1986) in representing Australia?
- How has our cultural representation changed over the last twenty or so years? In film? In politics? Literature?

Consider Arts Festivals, Artists, Aboriginal issues, foreign films being shot here and the exposure of our landscapes, the political climate, etc.

Activity 5

Research projects

Roles in theatre:

- Choose a role, not that of the actor, and research the contribution that person makes to creating the production. What is the timeline for that work? What are their functions? Who realises the designs?

Choices may include Director, Lighting Designer, Set Designer, Costume Designer, Sound Designer, Composer, Set Building workshop, the Mechanists' department, Stage Managers, etc.

Production Styles:

- Lavish versus Minimalist – find examples of two productions of the same work and compare the styles of presentation. What components remain similar? What components are made redundant? How do the changes affect the audience experience of the play?

Touring:

- Watching the film, how did the production have to change for the tour?

Consider the shape and size of the theatre, the set, blocking, what further adaptation is required by the cast once they are on the set in the theatre.

Many companies tour Australia regionally and visit schools.

- What touring productions have you seen? In what ways were there similarities between the production in the film and the production you saw?
- Research touring. Choose a facet of the tour – travel, venues, funding, publicity, set and lighting transfers (re-design) and find resources for supporting touring projects in Australia. Visit the website <http://www.inthecompanyofactors.com> for some links to resources sites.
- Access sites for organisations such as Arts NSW, Arts Projects Australia, DFAT, etc.
- For a specific comparison find plans for two venues (<http://www.sydneytheatre.com.au> for plans of the wharf 1 theatre and http://www.sydneyoperahouse.com/sections/about_the_house/venues for plans of the Drama theatre in the Opera House) and think about the challenges in transferring a show from one venue to another.

Activity 6

Adapting a piece of writing

English/Literature courses:

- Choose a well-known piece of writing like a poem, a fairy tale or fable and adapt it to include current issues for youth. For example, homelessness or abusive families (*Cinderella*, *Snow White*); issues of global environmental concern; bushfires/rural threat (*Bambi*, *The Boy and the Dyke*).
- Choose a cartoon and take the text out of the box layout and into a dialogue between characters. Act out the transformed text. Is the message or joke still clear?

Drama courses:

- Adapt a scene from a selected classic play into more colloquial or accessible language. Take a scene from a studied text and break it down into a series of points expressed in the scene. What does each character want from the other? Who is controlling the action? What social views are expressed? What forms of expression are used – pauses, overlapping dialogue, broken thoughts, inner monologue? Then, using the same characters and opinions expressed in the scene, re-write (adapt) the dialogue.

- Discuss a literal translation – how would this make the adaptation clearer or less clear? In a literal translation the language is translated and written directly into English. The literal translation may not make grammatical sense and sentences may scan differently – rhymes no longer rhyme for example.
- Are there other ways of adapting a play without actually changing the language? Do you change the meaning of a piece by changing its setting, or the gender of the characters?

Activity 7 – Film and Media Studies courses

The production values of the film *In the Company of Actors*

One of the qualities of a good film or documentary is that the viewer becomes so absorbed in the narrative that the nuts and bolts of the film are not obvious. We need to consciously deconstruct the elements that create the experience on screen to understand the process. Respond to the following questions after reading the excerpts from the statements of Director Ian Darling, Editor Sally Fryer and Cinematographer Simon Smith. (See <http://www.inthecompanyofactors.com> for full statements.)

Director's Statement (excerpt)

The rehearsal room is considered such a sacred space – where actors bare their souls to the process, make mistakes, and find their character in the relative safety of the rehearsal room, without exposing themselves to the outside world. Access to cameras is typically forbidden at all times. The idea of filming behind stage during a performance at any level was pure madness.

I have long believed in the importance of theatre as an art form. I feel it is vital for us all to tell stories, even at the most primitive level. In a time of rapid technological development and change, theatre remains the closest thing we have to our traditional campfire stories, which over generations have kept our own history alive. Theatre is raw. Theatre is real, and when it works it can have such a profound effect, and live on in the minds of the audience forever.

My objective was to make a documentary that would demystify the process of creating theatre. Like any production, theatre evolves over time, and my aim was to capture this gradual evolution on film from the initial rehearsal process through to opening night. The best way to do this was to gain access to a professional theatre company at the start of a new production. No small ask. To my great surprise and excitement, the opportunity arose to film the rehearsal process of the Sydney Theatre Company's production of *Hedda Gabler* as the cast came together in Sydney, before moving to New York, for a one month season at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

Together with an experienced and talented documentary production crew, our aim was to take the viewer on a journey into this unknown world of stage acting and directing, and help break down the barriers that have long separated actors and their audiences. We highlight the commitment, dedication, vision and passion required to produce world-class theatre. We see that theatre doesn't just happen – that the 'magic' is the result of hard work by a hugely talented team of individuals.

Ian Darling

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Editor's Statement (excerpt)

The way I like to work, especially on such a 'big' project, is to cut much longer than necessary 'rough' sequences/selects of all interesting, useful shots that may make it into the final film. These sequences/selects are organised in such a way as to most efficiently be able to review footage relevant to a particular scene and to 'find' particular shots, moments, phrases etc. during the course of a long edit. In the case of *In the Company of Actors*, this meant about 180 initial sequences/selects which ranged from seventeen seconds to ninety minutes in length.

The biggest challenge we faced in editing *In the Company of Actors* was how much of the story of the play *Hedda Gabler* itself to tell. We knew that some of our potential viewers would have seen the play themselves or a version of it, some would have studied or be studying it at school or uni, and others would have no idea what *Hedda Gabler* was about. We wanted to try to hold the attention of all, and so needed to balance the need to explain the text for those who knew nothing about the play, whilst also being aware that for our purposes it was the process of putting on any play, the dynamics between cast and director, the involvement of creative and technical staff in the creation of theatre that was of most interest.

Sally Fryer

Cinematographer's Statement (excerpt)

When you are filming someone, it is a great privilege. There is an unspoken contract that happens between camera person and subject. I believe that you cannot expect good results from your work, if you are not prepared to honour your subject, and make them part of your process. I feel that if you treat your camera and your subject with dignity, there is greater possibility of wonderful results.

With *Hedda*, we had restrictions of where we could be on any given night – some of our own making, some made by the production, some even by New York union regulations. On some occasions we were recording the performance, on others we were with the Stage Manager in the wings, on others we were in the dressing rooms. Ultimately, these are woven together into the semblance of one or two key performances. Also, within the confines of where you can be, there are options of how you choose to move the camera. These choices can be planned, which is most often the case in drama, or more intuitive, as happens in documentary shooting. If you remain in the moment, you are ready for whatever may happen, and can make the crucial split-second decisions you need to make. 'Do I follow that?' 'Do I let that person leave frame?' 'Do I keep rolling?' – All important questions!

After more than twenty years in the film industry, I have learned to trust the magic of the camera and of the pure intention. I have often kept rolling a beat longer than I had planned to, only to receive a beautiful 'moment from the Gods' on film. This is our parallel of the actor's experience.

Simon Smith

- Are there any moments in the film when you were conscious of the filming process taking place?
- Does the fact that there are no direct questions addressed to the performers, at least on screen, enhance the film?
- Do you think the film gets the balance right between performers and others explaining their practices and beliefs and the sequences of the rehearsals themselves?
- How do the recurring shots of both Sydney and New York suggest both a sense of place and context for this production of *Hedda Gabler*?
- What part do sounds and music play in this documentary?

- What decisions might be involved in choosing which parts of the filmed material make it into the final film?
- This documentary film is observational, without the use of a narrator. How have the editor and director created a sense of journey through the film?

Activity 8

Discussion: Actor process – working between media and the relationship with the Director

Many actors who are now best known for their screen performances started their careers on stage and in some cases have

continued to move between the screen and the stage. Screen actors who have worked successfully in both film and theatre include Kevin Spacey, Judi Dench, Maggie Smith, Alec Guinness, Marilyn Monroe, Laurence Olivier and Marlon Brando, to name just a few. In Australia, apart from Cate Blanchett, Justine Clarke, Hugo Weaving and Aden Young who all appear in this Sydney Theatre Company production of *Hedda Gabler*, Geoffrey Rush, Rachel Griffiths, Deborah Mailman, Wendy Hughes, Richard Roxburgh and others have all successfully moved between acting in feature films, on stage and in television programs.

When Richard Eyre – director of the recent film *Notes on a Scandal* (2006, starring Cate Blanchett



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and Judi Dench) and a successful theatre director in London – was asked how different it is directing fine actors such as Dench on stage and on celluloid, this is what he said:

There is a huge difference in process. There is a difference in the way an actor behaves on stage and how they behave on film but in the end it is a similar sort of relationship with the director. As a director, you are always talking about how a character moves, thinks and feels and behaves. The ways of demonstrating the difference is the difference between stage and screen. In film the obligation is to give a performance in that single moment the film is running through the camera. That's the hope.²

In response to a further question about the difference between stage and film performances, Eyre said:

As a director you are in control of the relationship between the audience and the performer on stage. But on film, you're not really in control of the way the experience between the actor and the audience is mediated between the screen and those watching.³

Referencing the film *In the Company of Actors*:

- What do we learn are the differences between the experience of being onstage in a play and working in a film for the actor?

- Why, as an actor, might they 'need' to be in a play as well as in a film?
- For an audience member how does the experience of seeing an actor in the flesh differ from seeing them in film?
- Students from the schools audience reacted very naturally around the cast in the Q&A – do you think seeing the cast perform live onstage changed their experience of 'seeing a star'?
- Did hearing the cast members talk about themselves, their thoughts about the play and the importance of theatre, strengthen or lessen your impressions of them as 'stars'?





The Filmmakers

Produced and Directed by	Ian Darling
Editor	Sally Fryer
Director of Photography	Simon Smith
Line Producer	Isabel Perez
Music Composer	Alan John
Sound Recordist	Leo Sullivan
Consulting Producer	Susan MacKinnon
Production Assistant	Mary Macrae
Prod. Office Manager	Kate Walker
Assistant Editors	Hilary Balmond
	Penny Wilkinson
Digital Colourist	Warren Lynch
Sound Mixer	Mike Gissing
Sound Editor	Kimmy Sekel
Titles Design & Promo	Matthew Minnett
Web Design	Swivel Creative Rachel Dight



Hedda Gabler on tour

Julle Tesman	Julie Hamilton
Berte	Annie Byron
Jorgen Tesman	Anthony Weigh
Hedda Gabler	Cate Blanchett
Thea Elvsted	Justine Clarke
Judge Brack	Hugo Weaving
Ejlert Lovburg	Aden Young
Director	Robyn Nevin
Adaptor	Andrew Upton
Set Designer	Fiona Crombie
Costume Designer	Kristian Fredrikson
Lighting Designer	Nick Schlieper
Composer	Alan John
Sound Designer	Paul Charlier
Literal Translation	Marit Andersen
Artistic Associate	Tom Wright
Asst. Lighting Designer	Chris Twyman
General Manager	Rob Brookman
Company Manager	Jo Dyer
Production Manager	Annie Eves-Boland
Stage Manager	Mary Macrae
Asst. Stage Manager	Georgia Gilbert
Hair, Wig & Wardrobe	Lauren A. Proietti
Head Carpenter	James McKay
Head Mechanist	Eric Duffy



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Glossary

See <http://www.inthecompanyofactors.com> education pages for a more extensive glossary.

- Acoustics** The way sound is reflected, projected, absorbed and heard in a space such as a theatre or concert hall. Actors and musicians will often refer to good or bad acoustics.
- Adaptation** Changing an original literary work in some way or another, sometimes to update it and/or make it more accessible and contemporary.
- 'Bump in'** Setting up the theatre space with the production elements and moving the company's equipment in to the theatre.
- Tech Week** The technical rehearsal period in the theatre prior to having audiences, in which actors, lighting, costumes, music and design elements are combined on stage for the first time.
- Blocking** The rehearsal process whereby the movements of the actors during the play are set. The movements are recorded in the Prompt Copy by stage management. Notation is usually made by a shorthand of symbols and initials (eg. Q X USOP to K = Queen crosses upstage OP to the King) and use of a small template of the stage setting.

References, resources and further reading

<http://www.inthecompanyofactors.com.au>

Further detail about the cast and crew, links to Australian theatre companies and resources, view the trailer for the film and download this study guide.

<http://www.bam.org>

The website for Brooklyn Academy of Music.

<http://www.sydneytheatre.com.au>

The website for the Sydney Theatre Company.

http://www.currency.com.au/product_detail.aspx?productid=242

Access to the Currency Press 2004 edition of Andrew Upton's adaptation.

<http://www.ibsen.net>

Listings of current and recent productions of Ibsen plays, biographical information and links to related Ibsen sites.

<http://www.gutenberg.org>

Online book catalogue. The 1891 Gosse translation of *Hedda Gabler* is available here for free.

<http://www.hollywoodlitsales.com/cf/journal/dspjournal.cfm?intID=2058>

A description of the role of producers in theatre and film. Accessed 14 May 2007.

<http://www.documentaryaustralia.com.au>

The web site for the Documentary Australia Foundation.

Endnotes

¹ <http://www.ibsen.net/index.gan?id=11130435&subid=0> Accessed 5 July 2007.

² http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/hr/content_display/features/interviews_profiles/e3ia58a4d3641fe5324577c6df9159c1c54 Accessed 3 July 2007.

³ *ibid.*

Marguerite O'Hara is a freelance writer based in Melbourne.

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The donation and distribution of this study guide and DVD was made possible by funding from
The Caledonia Foundation.

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