

# SPENCER

TEACHERS'  
RESOURCES  
2019



## ABOUT THESE TEACHERS' RESOURCES

*Spencer* is an excellent example of contemporary Australian writing and ensemble theatre for Drama and Theatre students, as well as an accessible work that provides rich stimulus for students studying a range of Arts- and Humanities-based subjects from Years 9 through 12.

These Teachers' Resources are a collection of thoughts and activities designed to prompt discussion and ignite ideas back in your classroom, as well as more targeted provocations specially designed for students of Drama and Theatre Studies.

If you would like to know more about how the piece can relate to your subject's specific state syllabus, or have any other questions regarding this material, please don't hesitate to get in touch with us at [education@labkelpie.com](mailto:education@labkelpie.com).

This document is structured with three main parts:

**Background**, **The Themes**, and **The Play**, with additional resources compiled under **Resources** at the end.

The **Background** section includes information on the company and team involved, as well as the setting, history and genesis of the play text. This is a simple, valuable start for everybody.

**The Themes** section is for all students. While it provides a broader context for the work that Drama and Theatre Studies students will undertake in the next section, it purposefully doubles as a useful reference for teachers of English (Writing, Character), Sociology, Psychology, and Physical Education (Sports Culture and Ethics).

**The Play** section is designed for Drama and Theatre Studies students, but of course may be used by classes of any of the above subjects to explore how some of the themes they have explored are communicated.

This section is divided into two parts: **The Script** covers the style, structure, language and the writing process, and **The Production** covers direction, rehearsal and design processes involved in staging the work.

**Resources** contains a list of the comprehensive further resources available in the *Spencer Teachers Resources* Dropbox, some of which are referenced in the main body of this document, and some are simply extra resources for teachers to use at their discretion, including articles, scripts and audio.

# INDEX

Welcome	4
<b>BACKGROUND</b>	<b>5</b>
1. Synopsis	6
2. History	7
3. Setting	8
4. The Team	9
<b>THE THEMES</b>	<b>13</b>
1. Family	14
2. The Dream vs The Reality	16
3. Identity	17
4. Depression in Men & Toxic Masculinity	18
<b>THE PLAY, PART I: THE SCRIPT</b>	<b>21</b>
1. Devising The Work	22
2. Realism	24
3. Comedy	26
4. Australian Theatre	27
<b>THE PLAY, PART II: THE PRODUCTION</b>	<b>28</b>
1. Direction: The Big Picture	29
2. Direction: Casting	30
3. Direction: The Rehearsal Process	31
4. Design: Set & Lighting	32
5. Design: Props	34
6. Design: Music & Transitions	35
7. Analysis & Evaluation	37
<b>RESOURCES</b>	<b>40</b>
Resources Dropbox	41
Attached Resources	42

## **CONTENT WARNING**

*Spencer* contains adult themes and coarse language. These warnings also extend to the content of these resources, as adult themes and language may appear in script excerpts, interviews, exercises or linked resources included in this education pack.

The work explores themes of family, identity, toxic masculinity, depression, and mental health.

Teachers are asked to explore these resources in advance and use their discretion.

Students and teachers alike are reminded of the support offered by the following organisations:

<b>Lifeline</b>	13 11 14
<b>Kids Helpline</b>	1800 55 1800

## WELCOME



Lab Kelpie is a theatre company dedicated to the production of new work by Australian playwrights.

We actively seek out works that engage audiences by interrogating with intelligence and vigour how relationships, power, family, love and politics function in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

As strong advocates of new writing, we support Australian playwrights by commissioning, developing, presenting and touring their work, encouraging our writers to take risks and inspire audiences with the themes and messages they want to explore.

Katy Warner's early contributions to Lab Kelpie – 2016's *A Prudent Man* and 2017's *Spencer* – were instrumental to the revised outlook of our young company. They set in motion a series of events that saw us focus our model, incorporate with a board of passionate industry professionals, and establish the mission statement you see to the left.

Since then we have premiered brand new Australian works *Oil Babies* by Petra Kalive and *Alone Outside* by Liz Newell, presented the Victorian premiere of Mary Anne Butler's multi-award-winning *Broken*, and developed, staged and toured Adam Fawcett's debut work *Become The One. A Prudent Man* has gone on to win numerous awards and toured all around Australia and overseas (and is still performed to schools and communities to this day), *Spencer* is touring nationally in 2019, and we look forward to premiering Ms Warner's brand new work *Refined* to Australian audiences in November 2019.

Lab Kelpie Education aims to help you get the most out of your theatre experience with us, and to make meaningful connections between our work and your studies. Welcome to the company – and see you at the theatre!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Lyall'.

Lyall Brooks  
Artistic Director, Lab Kelpie

***Lab Kelpie acknowledges the Traditional Owners of country throughout Australia and recognises their continuing connection to the land on which we perform. We pay our respects to them and their cultures; and to elders both past and present.***

**BACKGROUND**

# 1. SYNOPSIS

*Spencer* is set over the course of one weekend in the suburban living room of the sports-mad, tight-knit but emotionally ill-adjusted Prior family. Fierce single-mum matriarch Marilyn contends with her three adult children – wayward daughter Jules, mouthy coulda-been Ben and AFL golden boy Scott – as she furiously tries to prepare the house for the combined birthday party and first meeting of the two-year-old son, Spencer, Scott hadn't until recently known he had.

By Friday night, all three siblings have moved back home. Scott is finding the pressure of the upcoming season and becoming both a very public elite sportsman and a new dad overwhelming, and seems to want familial comfort and distraction. Ben has been unceremoniously dumped by his fiancé and has nowhere else to go, but is happily taking advantage of his little brother being home – drawing on his own nearly-made-it football career and current local Auskick coaching position to dispense endless training and tactical advice. Jules arrives suddenly – and without explanation – her employment and relationship statuses empty, her car full of her belongings.

Saturday morning – the day of Spencer's arrival – sees the door opened instead by a completely unexpected guest. Ian, the ex-husband and father who hasn't been seen for eighteen years, is here to meet his grandson in the house that's "still partly mine, isn't it?"

Ordered to leave by a furious Marilyn, Ian instead sets up his tent in the living room – where his children are able to reacquaint themselves with him with alternate ambivalence and resentment. As Marilyn returns and old hostilities spin into a cyclonic climax, Scott announces to a shellshocked family that he is quitting football... before receiving a bombshell of his own – a text telling him Spencer isn't coming.

Later that night, while Ian and his tent are banished to the dogshit-laden backyard, Marilyn, Ben and Jules take part in a drunken post-mortem of the weekend. Old emotional band-aids are prised off and their scabs picked, Ian finally breaks back into the house and joins in, and the previously invulnerable Scott has a psychological breakdown – the first time anyone in the family has truly heard his long-standing cries for help. Marilyn sends everyone out, and the scene ends with her and Scott sitting alone in the near-dark.

By Sunday morning the house is a shambles, and over hangovers and cold sausage rolls Marilyn tells Jules, Ben and even Ian that although she's "not apologising" for her behaviour... she's sorry; "Scotty knows it, and you need to know it too." She attempts to tell them that Spencer is coming – Scotty is off sorting things out – but in typical Prior fashion no one listens, Ben starts to dance with his Mum to save her from showing her emotions, and Jules and Ian join in. Unseen, Scott enters with a child's backpack and supplies, watches his gloriously dysfunctional family for a moment, and announces "Spencer's here" just as the lights go out and the play ends.

## 2. HISTORY

Knowing Lab Kelpie were looking for a brand new, broad-appeal Australian comedy to add to their stable, Katy Warner showed her new script of *Spencer* to the company at the end of 2015.

The script was already a finalist for the 2014 Max Afford Playwright's Award and was shortlisted for the 2015 Playwriting Australia New Development Program.

*"We'd already been big fans of Katy's writing for some years when she surprised us by sending us *Spencer* to read. Although it was a departure from what we knew of her style up to that point, the script is still very much Katy's voice – intelligent, gripping and stealthily poignant – and we were won over the moment we read it."*  
*Adam Fawcett, Lab Kelpie Creative Producer*

In early 2016 Lab Kelpie held a development workshop at Arts Centre Melbourne with dramaturg John Kachoyan and a group of actors, from which Ms Warner developed a final draft, while Lab Kelpie began sourcing funding for its presentation season.

Sharon Davis was appointed as director and Rob Sowinski and Bryn Cullen as set and lighting designers in January 2017, with full casting completed by March. After a three-week rehearsal, *Spencer's* world premiere season was presented at Melbourne's Chapel off Chapel between 11 – 28 May 2017. The work ultimately received two 2017 Green Room Award nominations: for Best New Writing (Katy Warner) and Best Performance (Lyall Brooks).

It was immediately pitched at national touring marketplaces where strong interest from many regional and interstate venues resulted in a 2019 national tour being coordinated by Lab Kelpie in partnership with arTour Queensland, CircuitWest WA, and Creative Victoria. The three-month tour will play 29 shows in 23 venues in Victoria, Western Australia, Queensland and New South Wales between July and September 2019.

The script for *Spencer* was published by Lab Kelpie Press in June 2019.

### 3. SETTING

Spencer is set in the present day, with the action taking place in the lounge room of Marilyn's house over the course of a weekend.



## DISCUSS

- Why do you think the playwright chose this setting?
- What is the main area of your home? Where does everyone meet or congregate?
- How do they gather – around a table, on chairs and sofas, on cushions, standing?
- What is your connection to the things in there? Do you have a particular chair, or an old childhood drawing on the wall? What about other family members? Does the space and its contents reflect everyone in the family?

## RESEARCH

Jump online and look at some other common areas – modern and historical. You might like to split into groups and research one of the following before comparing with the rest of the class.

What typical activity/people would you find in:

- A modern Australian lounge room?
- A modern American living room?
- A 1970s Australian rumpus room?
- An 1860s English drawing room?
- The Great Hall of a 17<sup>th</sup> Century English manor?
- The Great Hall of Hogwarts?
- An ancient Scandinavian mead hall?

## 4. THE TEAM



### **Katy Warner // Playwright**

Katy Warner is a Melbourne-based playwright and graduate of the Victorian College of the Arts (Master of Writing for Performance). Her plays have been presented across Australia, New Zealand and Edinburgh as part of Festival Fringe. She is an AWGIE winner (Best Children's Theatre for *Reasons to Stay Inside*), recipient of the Melbourne Fringe Award for Best Emerging Writer (*These are the isolate*) and two-time Green Room award nominee for New Writing (*A Prudent Man* and *Spencer*). Katy's debut novel *Everywhere, Everything, Everyone* is published in August 2019 by Hardie Grant. She is a proud member of the Australian Writers Guild.

### **Sharon Davis // Director**

Sharon completed her actor training at The Victorian College of the Arts and has worked extensively throughout the industry as an actor, producer, voice over artist, director, and industry advocate. Recent notable roles include Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing* for Essential Theatre, Smeraldina in *The Servant of Two Masters* for Make a Scene and La Mama Theatre, *Australia Day* for Hit Productions, and *Mother & Son* for Queensland Theatre. On screen, she has also appeared in *It's a Date*, *Neighbours* and *Killing Time*. Sharon has been a proud member of Equity since 2002 and has been working actively with the union to help support and advocate for the rights of working artists in Australia.



### **Rob Sowinski // Set & Lighting Co-Designer**

Rob is a lighting and set designer based in Melbourne. He is resident designer for Lyric Opera of Melbourne and Watch This, and collaborates with a range of companies on national and international projects. Recent work includes *Palace of the End* (Dan Clarke/Theatre Works), *Angels in America* (Cameron Lukey Presents) and *Merrily We Roll Along* and *Assasins* for Watch This. Green Room Award nominations include MKA's *Triangle*, Watch This' *Pacific Overtures* and MKA's *The Trouble with Harry*. Rob has taught design at Monash University and the National Theatre Drama School, and his design work has been seen in Hong Kong, New York, Tel Aviv, New Zealand and Jerusalem.

### **Bryn Cullen // Set & Lighting Co-Designer**

Bryn is a Melbourne based lighting and spatial designer specialising in dramatic theatre, opera, musicals, and experimental work. Bryn has considerable experience in performing arts; initially training as an acrobat through the National Institute of Circus Arts before finding his way backstage into the realms of performance technology. In 2017 Bryn has had the pleasure of working as associate lighting designer on *Cabaret* (Showtune Productions and David M Hawkins), associate lighting designer on *Merrily We Roll Along* (Watch This), co-lighting design on *L'incoronazione di Poppea* (Lyric Opera of Melbourne), and ongoing technical work provided to Marriner Group and Monash University.



### **Tanje Ruddick // Stage & Production Manager**

Tanje is a freelance theatre practitioner with a lengthy career working on national and international touring productions in the fields of Stage, Production and Tour Management, and Technical Direction. She has worked on commercial productions of *Dirty Dancing*, *Flowerchildren* and most recently *Calendar Girls* and built and toured many shows for Hit Productions and Life Like Touring such as *Barbie*, *Peppa Pig*, *Dora the Explorer*, *Scooby Doo*, *Sesame Street* and *The Octonauts*. Tanje was the touring Technical Manager for Life Like Touring's international productions of the *Dora the Explorer* franchise productions in Singapore, Bahrain and Sri Lanka.



### **Adam Fawcett // Producer**

Adam Fawcett is a theatre producer and playwright based in country Victoria. As co-founder of Lab Kelpie, he has produced all of their works since 2012, including Katy Warner's *Spencer* and *A Prudent Man* (both nominated for Green Room Awards for New Writing). *A Prudent Man* won the audience choice award at the 2016 Melbourne Fringe Festival and has since toured festivals and venues across Australia and New Zealand, playing to over 5,500 people. In 2016 Adam produced *Animal* for Influx, which won four Green Room Awards in 2016. He is also an emerging playwright, having written Lab Kelpie's recent Playtime Award-winning production, *Become The One*.





### **Lyall Brooks // Ben**

Lyall is Lab Kelpie's founding Artistic Director. He recently starred in Mary Anne Butler's *Broken*, Katy Warner's *Spencer* and her award-winning solo show *A Prudent Man*, as well as directing Adam Fawcett's *Become The One* and Liz Newell's *Alone Outside* and assistant directing Petra Kalive's *Oil Babies*. Other professional theatre credits include *North by Northwest* (Arts Centre Melbourne) *Savages* (fortyfivedownstairs), *Penelope* and *The Pride* (Red Stitch), *The Heretic* (Melbourne Theatre Company) and *Sunday In the Park with George* (Victorian Opera). He has received four Green Room nominations across mainstage, independent and music theatre, and was a 2017 Theatre Works Associate Artist.

### **Jamieson Caldwell // Scott**



A graduate of the Victorian College of the Arts, Jamieson's most recent theatre credits include *Hamlet* for the Melbourne Theatre Company, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, *Macbeth* and *Romeo and Juliet* for the Australian Shakespeare Company, and the lead in HIT Productions' national tour of David Williamson's *Managing Carmen*. Television appearances include *The Doctor Blake Mysteries*, *Blue Heelers*, Channel 7's *The Power of Ten*. Jamieson is also resident actor, writer and director for Phunktional Arts, a theatre company committed to positive social change and focused on reaching and engaging at-risk youths.



### **Jane Clifton // Marilyn**

Jane Clifton is the genuine show-business all-rounder, managing to carve out a four decade-long career including TV appearances in a string of early Australian TV shows such as *Division 4*, *Homicide*, *Ryan*, *Bluey*, *Holiday Island* and her most-famous role as Margo in *Prisoner*. In the music world Jane fronted the ground-breaking feminists-on-Countdown band Stiletto, had two top 10 pop singles with *Girl On The Wall* (solo) and *Taxi Mary* (with Jo Jo Zep) and has appeared in the smash-hit stage shows *Mum's The Word* and *Menopause The Musical*. As a novelist she has had three crime novels published and a memoir, *The Address Book* (Penguin 2011). She is also a very civil celebrant.

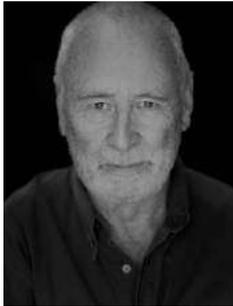
### Fiona Harris // Jules

Fiona wrote and co-starred on the ABC sketch comedy show *Flipside*, Channel Nine's *Comedy Inc*, and Network Ten's *Skithouse*. She has played guest roles on *The Beautiful Lie*, *The Ex-PM*, *Mr & Mrs Murder*, *Offspring*, *Tangle*, *The Librarians*, *The Time of Our Lives* and *Beaconsfield*. Together with her husband Mike McLeish, she is also the creator and star of Princess Pictures' comedy series *The Drop Off*. She was head scriptwriter on series 3 of the ABC3 kids' series *Prank Patrol* and has **also** worked as story consultant on shows such as *Bed of Roses* and *The Time of Our Lives*. Fiona has recently released a series of children's books, *The Super Moopers*, and regularly co-hosts ABC 774 Evenings.



### Roger Oakley // Ian

Well known for his many television appearances on *Something in the Air*, *The Damnation of Harvey McHugh* and *Home & Away*, Roger is most prolific in the theatre. Over the decades he has acted in plays by Jane Austen in Hull, Tom Stoppard in Auckland, G B Shaw in Belfast, Hannie Rayson in Sydney, Ron Elisha in New York and Shakespeare all over the place. Some of his recent theatre appearances were in *August*, *Osage County*, *The Cherry Orchard*, *Circle Mirror Transformation*, *Richard III*, and *The Golden Dragon* for Melbourne Theatre Company; *Beyond the Neck* for Red Stitch; *The Nightwatchman* for Theatreworks; and the premiere and recent national tours of *Hello Goodbye & Happy Birthday* for Malthouse/Melbourne Festival. He has premiered many Australian plays and his roles in Michael Gurr's *Jerusalem* and *Sex Diary of an Infidel* won him Green Room Awards.



## DISCUSS

For classes relatively new to theatre, talk about each of the roles mentioned above:

- What does each person do?
- What aspects of a production are they responsible for?
- Are the roles the same or necessary for every theatre production?
- What roles might be missing from this team list?

**THE THEMES**

## 1. FAMILY

*“You don’t choose your family.  
They are God’s gift to you,  
as you are to them.”*

Archbishop Desmond Tutu



*“There’s no such thing as fun  
for the whole family.”*

Jerry Seinfeld

### DISCUSS

Consider the quotes to the left.

The first is used by the playwright, written on the very page of (but not part of the main text of) the script. You may have seen this before in books and scripts. The second quote was used by Lab Kelpie and the producer when marketing the show – it provided an attention-grabbing idea at the start of their TV/social media promotional videos.

What do these each mean and how do they relate to the play?

Why do playwrights and authors use include these sorts of quotes at the start of their scripts or books? Is it a thematic statement? Or for inspiration? Or perhaps control of the message they want the work to send? Find other books and plays that may have these and ask the same questions of their usage.

### ACTIVITY

Research other quotes about Family, and use one as a starting point for a creative writing piece.

Sharon Davis reflects on the theme of Family in her Director's Treatment (attached and in the Resources Dropbox):

*"Familial love is not a clear, straight line. It can be brutal and too honest. Parents can be difficult and selfish while still loving you more than they can say. Siblings are often the ones that draw first blood and their casual taunts linger far longer than that scar you got from riding your bike head first into the tow bar of the caravan (remember that, Mum?!). You complain about their frustrating flaws but will passionately defend them to anyone who dares agree with you!"*

Do you agree or disagree with this sentiment? Why or why not?

## ACTIVITY

### CONFLICT MATRIX

Construct a matrix of the characters' conflicts with each other – individually and when they "gang up" against another. How do these begin, manifest, climax? How do they resolve (if at all)?

*Yeah, yeah, yeah but he was family.  
And that means something.*

Marilyn, Scene 1

## DISCOVER

Look up "dysfunctional family" on Wikipedia. It notes that some of the most common, near-universal signs of a dysfunctional family are:

- Lack of empathy, understanding, and sensitivity towards certain family members, while expressing extreme empathy or appeasement towards one or more members who have real or perceived "special needs". In other words, one family member continuously receives far more than he or she deserves, while another is marginalized.
- Denial (refusal to acknowledge abusive behaviour, possibly believing that the situation is normal or even beneficial; also known as the "elephant in the room.")
- Inadequate or missing boundaries for self (e.g. tolerating inappropriate treatment from others, failing to express what is acceptable and unacceptable treatment, tolerance of physical, emotional or sexual abuse.)
- Disrespect of others' boundaries (e.g. physical contact that other person dislikes; breaking important promises without just cause; purposefully violating a boundary another person has expressed)
- Extremes in conflict (either too much fighting or insufficient peaceful arguing between family members)
- Unequal or unfair treatment of one or more family members due to their birth order, gender, age, family role (mother, etc.), abilities, race, caste, etc. (may include frequent appeasement of one member at the expense of others, or an uneven/inconsistent enforcement of rules)

Can you identify these traits in the characters and relationships of *Spencer*?

## 2. THE DREAM VS. THE REALITY

MARILYN

*Footy was the dream;  
it was the only bloody dream –*

SCOTT

*It wasn't my dream.*

Scene 6

Disappointment is pretty much guaranteed for all of us, and one of the hardest experiences to deal with in life. It can crush our ego and define our future dreams and expectations. It can also shape the way we manage our relationships with those closest to us.

All of the characters in *Spencer* are dealing with either the pressure of living up to expectations or the weight of being a disappointment to the family and themselves.

### DISCOVER

Read this terrific article from *Huffington Post* about how to cope when the reality of our life doesn't live up to the expectation.

[https://www.huffpost.com/entry/when-reality-doesnt-meet\\_b\\_8317970](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/when-reality-doesnt-meet_b_8317970)

### DISCUSS

How does the difference between the dream and the reality have an effect on the way the characters in the play behave and speak – especially to each other?

### ACTIVITY

#### EMPATHY LETTER

Imagine yourself as each of the characters when they were 10 years old. Now, as that 10 year old, write a letter to the grown up character talking about how you imagine your life is going to be. Use whatever information you can find in the script - and your imagination.

### 3. IDENTITY

*You gotta step up Scotty. Not gonna get noticed without some impressive plays mate.  
You got the talent, mate, but so did I and look where I'm at. Doing all right I suppose.  
Got the boys to coach, you know, that's a fucking big responsibility, a fucking honour y'know,  
but still, mate, still – I could've been all-Australian, reckon I would've won The Brownlow.  
Never got the chance, fucked it all.*

Ben, Scene 1

Mother, son, brother, girlfriend, footy player, unemployed, old, young, has-been, Australian, artist. These are just some of the labels or identities that are mentioned in Spencer. Scott is a football player. He's also a son, a brother, and now he's a father. We see Scott struggling to understand who he is now that he's a father and what it means for his family if he doesn't want to keep playing football.

#### DISCUSS

Who are you? What makes you who you are? Is it genetic or environmental? Or both? How do you talk about yourself and what are the labels you put on yourself? Why is it so important to define our identity? Can we have more than one?

Now think about collective identity. How do we identify ourselves as part of groups such as ethnicity or nationality, gender, politics, occupation, education, sports teams. Are there other common collective identities?

In your journal, reflect on your own identity and try to understand a little of what influences impact on this. What are some of the ways your identity can shift in relation to these influences? For example, do you they use different language or wear different clothes depending on who you are with? Be honest and don't self-edit – just write!

#### DISCOVER

Further your understanding with these great resources:

Athletic Identity (article):  
<https://believeperform.com/performance/athletic-identity/>

Australian identity and sport (audio file):  
<https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/bigideas/2016-08-22/7751532>

## 4. DEPRESSION IN MEN & TOXIC MASCULINITY



Psychiatrists and health care professionals accept that there is frequently a difference in the way men and women react to – or feel signs of – depression. Women often internalise depression — focusing on the emotional symptoms, such as worthlessness or self-blame. Men are more likely to externalise it, concentrating on the physical symptoms. Rather than feeling emotional, they might say they feel physically numb and complain of insomnia, stress or loss of energy. Rather than “sad”, they often become irritable and angry.

There are several myths about depression that can make men reluctant to talk about or seek help for their depression. These myths include the idea that:

- depression is a sign of personal weakness;
- “real men” are in control of their emotions and don’t let things get to them;
- feeling sad or down is not manly;
- anyone with enough willpower ought to be able to ‘snap out of it’; and
- men should not ask for help; they should be able to cope on their own.

Toxic masculinity is defined as the cultural ideal of manliness, where strength is everything while emotions are a weakness; where sex and brutality are yardsticks by which men are measured, while supposedly “feminine” traits – which can range from emotional vulnerability to simply not being hypersexual – are the means by which your status as “man” can be taken away.



This section and the next comes with a content warning. The material deals with signs and symptoms of depression and related mental health issues.

Some simple activities follow, but the approach to this theme is best left to teachers’ judgements. There are more reference materials in the Resources section that may also - with teacher discretion - be used by students to research the topic pre-show.

*Can't start too early mate. Gives us an edge over the competition.  
We're tight. We're a team. Don't like giving them too much time off –  
just makes them... complacent.*

Ben, Scene 2

In the GQ article *Fighting the Black Dog: Battling Depression in Sport* (in the Resources Dropbox), Professor of Psychiatry at University of Sydney Philip Boyce notes:

*"If elite sportsmen are not performing at the top level, they believe they've failed. They're trying to perform at 100 per cent; if they're only functioning at 70 per cent, they're told they're no good, and they risk losing their job, their living, everything. There's enormous psychological pressure on them.*

*"They don't judge themselves by what they've achieved, but by what they haven't achieved." And this intangible sense of pressure arrives early, when most are only in their late teens or early twenties – in their physical 'prime' – and also at a time of emotional and mental immaturity, when mechanisms for dealing with such strong setbacks aren't fully formed.*

*"Young men who are told they are invincible don't know how to cope when things go wrong. They don't have a career or social identity with a group outside sport. They don't have any other storyline and they haven't even achieved what they set out to achieve. They don't see an alternative life out there."*

*"When you're an athlete, you're a AAA competitive animal – you live to win and any perceived weakness, such as depression, is something to be locked away and never let into the light, because it could give your opponents an edge if you speak out. You need to believe you're unbreakable, and admitting to these sorts of issues makes you feel very, very human."*

Ultimately, a depressive sportsman sees success through the lens of failure, that is, a distortion where victory becomes relief – not relish.

## DISCUSS

How does the concept of toxic masculinity relate to Spencer? What examples are there from the play of behaviour that is shaped by a culture of toxic masculinity?

What are some of the lines in the play that reveal that Scott might not be coping?

Are there any other characters in the play that might be suffering from depression or other mental health issues such as low self-esteem, anxiety, or any others? What evidence do you have from the play that this might be the case? How do they exhibit – or cover – the symptoms?

How do the events of the play and the actions of the characters help or harm?

## RESEARCH

Refer to the page *Depression in Men* on the Beyond Blue website:

<https://www.beyondblue.org.au/who-does-it-affect/men/depression-in-men>

What are some of the symptoms and signs of depression, both physical and emotional? Imagine you're the actor playing Scott. From your investigation and research, what might be some of the ways you could indicate, through your performance, that Scott is struggling with his mental health?

Explore the physicality of someone who is struggling to admit they're struggling. How is that different to just playing "sadness" or "anger"? Record your discoveries in your journal.

JULES  
You OK?

SCOTT  
Yeah.

JULES  
Reckon you're full of bullshit..

SCOTT  
Me?

Scene 3

# **THE PLAY**

## **PART I: THE SCRIPT**

# 1. DEVISING THE WORK

In writing *Spencer*, Katy Warner knew she wanted to create a play based on a family not often seen on our stages.

*"I wanted to write about a working class, lower middle class family - like the families I knew and grew up with in WA. These people are my neighbours and friends and, yes, my family. Although they don't swear that much. And my parents are still together. But where's the drama in that? I knew that I wanted the Priors to be a family that we could recognise but who weren't stereotypical or cliché bogan types. I wanted to write a play that put the people I know and love onstage not to be laughed at, like so many depictions of 'Aussie bogans', but simply to be seen and heard. I don't think class is an issue we think is relevant in Australia and it is something we just don't seem to want to talk about. My aim was to write a mainstage show, like something we might see at the MTC, but make it about real people, people from the working class rather than the upper middle classes we usually see in Australian theatre."*

## DISCUSS

Consider the types of families and people audiences usually see in 'mainstage' shows. Whose stories do we see? Why do you think this is the case?

Why do you think it is important that we have a range of voices on our stages?

## DISCOVER

Take a further look at the Australia's unspoken class system with these informative articles from the ABC (also available in the Resources Dropbox):

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-04-14/class-act-nelly-thomas-on-being-bourgeois-and-working-class/9601992>

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-04-11/class-act-a-day-moving-between-melbournes-classes/9518864>

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-01-24/six-class-system-dispelling-myths-of-a-classless-australia/9339532>



# ACTIVITY

## CALM YOUR FARM... AND WRITE!

For teachers, we have provided a *Writing Workshop* well-suited to Drama students looking for inspiration in writing their own ensemble pieces, or to English classes tackling playwriting as part of their creative writing curriculum.

It can be found in the Resources Dropbox and is also attached to this document.

Written by Katy Warner and inspired by her own work process writing *Spencer*, this is suitable for an intensive 90-minute session or double period, aimed at igniting ideas and creativity, sharing simple yet first-rate techniques and sharpening skills.

Also available in the Resources Dropbox is *Simon Stephens: Writing Prompts*, a series of questions devised by the acclaimed UK playwright. These are intended as a complementary resource to Katy's workshop – and is indeed material that Katy uses for motivation and inspiration in her own writing.

## 2. REALISM

The theatre of Realism investigates and presents real people in everyday situations, dealing with common problems. A general movement that began in the 1870s, it became a style that illuminated humankind's struggles and concerns in an unflinching, straightforward way. It dispensed with older, more demonstrative or melodramatic practices – such as asides and soliloquies, ostentatious actions and heightened plots – to present succinct, everyday conversation and a plainness of speech and action that left room for interpretation, subtext and psychologically driven drama.

The everyday settings of Realistic theatre contributed to the power of the plays – the strong drama superimposed over an ordinary foundation wasn't difficult for audiences to understand and invest in. Famous examples of playwrights of this type of theatre include Henrik Ibsen (*A Doll's House*), Tennessee Williams (*A Streetcar Named Desire*), George Bernard Shaw (*Pygmalion*), and Australians Ray Lawler (*Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*), David Williamson (*The Removalists*), and Joanna Murray Smith (*Honour*).



# DISCOVER

What are some other elements of the theatre of Realism? Get the class to brainstorm a list on the board; don't worry about discussing right or wrong answers just yet.

How does Realism in theatre compare to Realism in visual art (painting and sculpture)? Film and television?

Research Stanislavski's appropriation and development of Realism in acting (psychological realism) and the different viewpoints around "Realism" vs "Naturalism". Is there an agreed definition across the world of what Realism is? Does it matter?

Look back at your list on the board and try, as a class, to sculpt your own definition. You can use previously studied plays as examples in your discussion. If this results in a mutual definition and shared language moving forward, great! But – again – there's no harm in not reaching consensus if everybody has contributed to a robust discussion!



### 3. COMEDY

Catherine Trieschmann from the Playwright's Centre in Minneapolis, USA, offers the excellent tips about writing comedic plays to the right.

## DISCUSS

Can you find evidence of any of these techniques in *Spencer*? How are they used and what is the result?

## ACTIVITY FIND YOUR FUNNY BONE

Learn from the masters. Use these extensive resources from the BBC's Writers' Room and create your own sketch comedy scene:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/writersroom/writers-lab/genre-toolkits/comedy>

#### SELF-DELUSION

Comedy is often found in the gap between how a character perceives himself and how we perceive him.

For example, Corky St. Clair in Christopher Guest's *Waiting for Guffman* believes he possesses theatrical genius, but this is nonsense, and we know it. Lena Dunham's character in *Girls*, Hannah Horvath, comes from a similar, although more subtle, mould. In that show, comedy often arises when Hannah perceives herself to be a more talented writer, a more loyal friend, or even better dressed than we perceive her.

When writing a comic character, ask yourself: Where is the gap between how this character perceives herself and how the audience receives her? Is it talent? Goodness? Bravery? The more varied and specific you can get, the more original your portrait will be.

#### CONTRADICTION

When writing comedy, it's helpful to think about contradiction on both the micro and macro level. What is contradictory in a character at large? And where is the contradiction line by line? Does this monologue or exchange end up in an entirely different place than it began?

#### INCONGRUITY

Like contradiction, incongruity depends upon difference and friction; however, incongruity refers more particularly to a state of being, rather than a personality characteristic. The baby speaking with an adult voice we often see in commercials is a very basic example. The disconnect in our mind between the image and the voice creates humour.

Humour frequently contains an unexpected, often sudden, shift in perspective.

When thinking about where to set your play, consider places that create dissonance with the dialogue and action.

## 4. AUSTRALIAN THEATRE

### DISCUSS

- How do we categorise theatre as ‘Australian’?
- What elements of a play make it Australian? Is it the story, the characters, the person who wrote it or the company producing it? Could it be all of those things, and more?
- What other Australian plays have you seen? How do you know they are Australian? Does it matter?
- What makes a play – or a film – an “Australian classic”?
- Why is Spencer a play and not a film? What are the differences?
- Do you agree with the comparisons to films and television shows mentioned by the reviewers? Why or why not?

### RESEARCH

Where does Spencer fit in the timeline of Australian Theatre?

*“This could well be the birth of a future Australian Classic”*

Maxim Boon  
*The Music*  
May 2017

*“Left me feeling as good as watching The Castle or Kath & Kim. It’s hilarious and it hurts in all the right places because it’s us.”*

Anne-Marie Peard  
*Sometimes Melbourne*  
May 2017

*“From Kath & Kim to Upper Middle Bogan, comedies with modern suburbanite clans have tended to focus on their “effluence.” This one remains firmly mired in fiscal and emotional recession and feels truer for it.”*

Cameron Woodhead  
*The Age*  
July 2019

# **THE PLAY**

## **PART II: THE PRODUCTION**

## 1. DIRECTION: THE BIG PICTURE

Take a look at the Creative Intention section of Sharon Davis' *Director's Treatment* (attached and in the Resources Dropbox).

### DISCUSS

- What is a Creative Intention?
- When might it be used? (Note the date, and use of future tense.) Why?
- Dissect some of the language in Sharon's descriptions. What do the words mean? What might these elements look like onstage?
- Consider who the stakeholders of a theatre show might be. Which ones are mentioned above? Which stakeholders aren't mentioned in this excerpt? Suggest the language that might be used to address them.
- How important is it to meet all the goals outlined in a Creative Intention or Director's Treatment?



Lab Kelpie Education



SPENCER Teachers' Resources



## 2. DIRECTION: CASTING



Take a look at the Casting section of Sharon Davis' *Director's Treatment* (attached and in the Resources Dropbox).

### DISCUSS

Do you agree with Sharon's analysis of the characters? Has she missed anything? Did you miss something she saw as important?

How important is this type of analysis before commencing the casting process? How is it beneficial? Or how might it be hindering?

Use examples of your class's previous productions, or plays you have studied or seen. Talk about the characters from these – you may know them better than the family from *Spencer* – and make notes of their important features that a director should cast for. Conversely, note other aspects of their personalities that you are more open to an actor bringing to the work.

Discuss the big picture: how does a director cast an ensemble? How important is the variation and balance of the actors playing these family members? How might the makeup of the *Spencer* ensemble – or other plays you have studied – been differently cast and what effects would these decisions have had on the final product?

### 3. DIRECTION: THE REHEARSAL PROCESS

#### ACTIVITY SCHEDULE SCHEDULE

Take a look at the Rehearsals section of Sharon Davis' *Director's Treatment* (attached and in the Resources Dropbox). She mentions she has "three weeks to put this premiere of *Spencer* together – a brand new, 90-minute, eight-scene five-hander."

How would you do it? Pair up with another student and, as co-directors, put together a projected rehearsal schedule. Activities to consider might be:

- a read through with the entire team
- a design presentation
- script analysis and character discussion
- scene work
- transition blocking
- costume fittings
- introducing props and set elements, including safety, feedback and discussion
- running several scenes in a row
- line runs
- first full "stumble through"
- dress runs

*REMEMBER: full dress runs with the complete set and design elements usually won't happen until the team moves into the theatre in tech week! Up until then everything happens in a rehearsal venue – often without many of those final components.*

#### DISCOVER ANATOMY OF A SCENE

Read through the attached *Anatomy of a Scene* document to get a glimpse into director Sharon Davis' processes, and her excellent use of analysis and evaluation methods by journaling her and the team's work and discoveries.

## 4. DESIGN: SET & LIGHTING

### ACTIVITY

#### MOOD BOARD

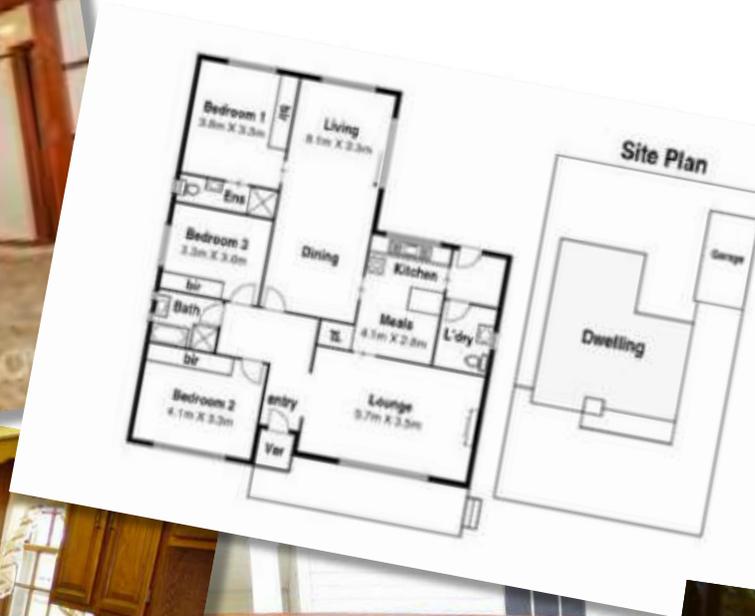
Read the *Interview with the Designers*, Rob Sowinski and Bryn Cullen (attached and in the Resources Dropbox).

Using the script of *Spencer* as inspiration, source 10-20 images and put together your own theatre designer mood board. This could be on Pinterest, a slide show, or old-fashioned paper cut-and-paste. Pictures could represent the feelings you got reading the script; or the textures or light the words inspired. They could show an example of the people or places in the story. They could be samples of materials that speak to you and you might wish to use. You might even find other shows' stage or lighting designs that stimulate your imagination.

Remember: just because the design of *Spencer* was realistic, it doesn't mean yours has to be. At this beginning point of the design process, simply collate what inspires you and reflects what your interpretation of the script.

Compare mood boards with the class, and with some of Rob and Bryn's own inspiration images over the page. How similar or different are everyone's boards? Talk about why people made certain choices or what parts of the script inspired certain choices.





## 5. DESIGN: PROPS

### ACTIVITY BUSY HANDS

Go through the script carefully and make a list of all the potential props and practical set pieces that could be used or seen in *Spencer*. This may be done individually, in groups or as a class. Make a note of whether it is interacted with or merely referenced, and which character/s use it.

(You may wish to compare it to the spreadsheet Lab Kelpie created, *Preliminary Props List* in the Resources Dropbox. This document, an example from Week 1 of rehearsals, was a combination of those props ascertained from the script and those suggested in early improvisations with the cast.)

How do you decide which items to use or show, and which ones to dismiss? How many do you really need? Which ones? What is the benefit of making such an exhaustive list in the first place? To the director? To the actor?

If you have time, take a look at the Stage Manager's *Pre-Set Props Checklist* (also in the Resources Dropbox). This is the final list of props used for the show. How has it changed from the early Week 1 rehearsal version?

## 6. DESIGN: MUSIC & TRANSITIONS

One of the most important challenges of the play for the team to solve was how to get from scene to scene without delaying the energy or drive. The play is episodic in structure, with each scene jumping forward in time by either hours or to the next day.

Director Sharon Davis wanted to use Australian music throughout the play and the cast talked about and agreed that this was one of those households where either the TV or the radio were almost always on; a constant noise that underscores the life of the house.

So music and lights were utilised to allow the *Spencer*'s scenes to transition from one to the next. Each music track starts out as non-diegetic (not of the direct narrative world of the play), but at some point transitions into a quality that is meant to sound like it's coming from the visible stereo in the living room. This again reminds the audience of this feeling that the radio is always on, but it fades out as the scene dialogue or action begins.

The location of the scenes doesn't change – it's always Marilyn's living room – but there are practical things that need to be dealt with such as props and costume changes to indicate the shift of time. Again, with the choice to make this a recognisable, naturalistic set, the team recognised a need to continue the form to costume and props.

With the exception of *All About That Bass*, Australian rock music was chosen. Each song is specifically used to give the audience a feel for what's to come or the mood of the characters. For example, Spiderbait's *Calyspo* starts with a nice, pretty sound, and lyrics about sunshine and happiness – but it quickly flips into heavy guitar and drums and aggressive vocals. It segues into Scene 3 where we see a calm and creative Jules who then, by way of constant phone calls she tries to dodge, blows up with her first line "I'm fucking busy!"





At the end of Scene 6, Scott, who has just told his Mum he's not as interested in playing footy as she is, ends the scene by telling everyone that Spencer isn't coming after all. The lights go down and the slow steady beat of *Reckless* by Australian Crawl underscore the slowed down movements of the actors as they either leave the stage or start to pull party debris from out of the ottoman or hutch. As the music swells to the classic line "Throw down your guns, don't be so reckless" the audience realises it's now hours later and Ben, Jules, and Marilyn are drunk amongst the tatters of the party decorations and food. As Marilyn sings along to the music, we are in the scene.

## ACTIVITY

### WIKKID TRAKS

Look at the transitions between each scene in the script. Make a list of each transition's characteristics: time of day, how much time passes, and the differences of what the play is transitioning from in the closing scene and to in the opening of the next scene: their tempos, moods, actions.

What music would you choose for each? Would you choose (like this production) mostly Australian rock songs? Or pop songs? Or classical music? Or a mix? Write them down next to each transition.

Or, if you would compose something entirely new (or something that maybe isn't necessarily "music") then describe how this new composition would sound (instruments, effects, tempo, etc)

## 7. ANALYSIS & EVALUATION

Watch (and enjoy!) the play. Make observations, take notes, and talk to each other about what you saw. Below are some questions and provocations to ignite discussion and engage your analytical and evaluation skills.

### DISCUSS

- What is physical comedy and how is it used in the play?
- How energetic are the performances, and what would it take to prepare for that each night?
- Which character did you identify with the most and why?
- How did the performers use their expressive and vocal skills to convey their characters'...
  - intentions?
  - inner conflicts?
  - relationships with the other family members?
- If you worked on the Conflict Matrix activity earlier, how many of these conflicts were noticeable on stage, and how overt (or otherwise) were they?
- Reflect on the theme of Family. How much of this was evident to you in the performance?
- Reflect on the themes of Depression and Pressure on Sportspeople and Mental Health. How did the actor playing Scott convey these pressures? When did he “cover it” with other emotions or actions and let the text do the work?
- Did you see the designers’ inspiration of un-updated, 1960s working class suburbia in the set? What elements were the most obvious? Or the most subtle?
- Did you notice the lighting states to signify times of the day? What about the subtle transitions during Scene 7 for practical sight issues?
- How effective was the music in eliciting mood and reflecting action?
- Consider all the roles mentioned earlier in **The Team** section. Who was responsible for each element you see, hear or experience, or had a hand it making it happen?
- Note how the cast utilise and interact with all the props. Were any of your initial ideas the same or similar? Were there any surprises? What are some of your ideas that could have added something great – big or small – to the show?

*“Mash together The Castle and Waiting for Godot, and remove all parental controls... this baby bear of a play kicks you right in the feels for a maximum six points.”*

Arts Review

*“The male-dominated, macho footy world of flexing muscles and pack mentality is mythologised and then cut down in the same way Lawler’s Summer of the Seventeenth Doll cut down the image of the tough outback hero... Touching, funny and truly Australian.”*

Melbourne Observer

*“It’s mayhem and madness; jocks, socks, snot and ugg boots. But it grabs hold when you least expect it, pulls at the heart strings between all the laughs, and stays with you long after the show has ended.”*

Stage Noise

*“Full of love and family and all the crap that happens between those two things. It will stick in your mind.”*

Theatre People

## DISCOVER

After you’ve seen the show, make notes about what you saw. You can either write your own review first, as below, or talk about and compare your notes with the class and read some of the other reviews from the original Australian season (found in the Resources Dropbox).

Do you agree with the way the reviewers saw the show? Why? Why not? Did they pick up on something you didn’t see? Did you see something that they perhaps missed?

## ACTIVITY

### CRITICAL STAGES

Write your own review of *Spencer*. Consider all the Dramatic or Stagecraft Elements you think apply. Consider the audience of the work – not just who was there and how they reacted, but also who the piece perhaps should be seen by. Don’t forget to keep a sense of your own character: how did you personally react to the work?



## ACTIVITY

Take a look at some of the promotional videos made for the show, found in the Resources Dropbox.

First, discuss with the class how effectively you think they reflect the work – its style, feeling, themes etc. Who do you think the intended audiences might be? How might the videos be improved?

Now, in groups, put together your own promotion for the show. This could be a traditional newspaper ad or poster, a static Facebook or Instagram advertisement (or gif carousel), a radio or podcast ad, a script or storyboard for a video, or (for those with the resources) use footage from the archival video and your own music, supers and/or voiceovers to create a promo video of your own.

(Please contact [education@labkelpie.com](mailto:education@labkelpie.com) if you would like access to the full archival video.)

**RESOURCES**

## RESOURCES DROPBOX

The Resources Dropbox is set out to mirror the sections in this document, and the order in which external resources are referenced.

Head to *Spencer's* Education Resources folder on Dropbox by following the link below.

[bit.ly/SpencerEducation](https://bit.ly/SpencerEducation)

Alternatively, you can find links to the same resources, as well as other Lab Kelpie shows, by emailing the team at [education@labkelpie.com](mailto:education@labkelpie.com).

### 01 BACKGROUND

### 02 THE THEMES

- 01 *Huffington Post* article: When Reality Doesn't Meet Expectations
- 02 *Believeperform.com* article: Sports Psychology – Athletic Identity
- 03 *GQ* article: Fighting the Black Dog: Battling Depression in Sport
- 04 Further Reading (a collection of articles that may be used at teacher's discretion)

### 03 THE PLAY: THE SCRIPT

- 01 ABC article: Why We Need Working Class Voices
- 02 ABC article: Inside The Class Divide
- 03 ABC article: Think Australia is Classless? There's Actually Six of Them
- 04 *Writing Workshop* by Katy Warner (*Calm Your Farm*)
- 05 *Simon Stephens Writing Prompts*

### 04 THE PLAY: THE PRODUCTION

- 01 *Director's Treatment*: Creative Intention, Family, Casting and Rehearsals
- 02 *Anatomy of a Scene*
- 03 *Interview with the Designers*
- 04 *Preliminary Props List*
- 05 *Master Props List*
- 06 Reviews folder
- 07 Promo Videos folder

## ATTACHED RESOURCES

Several important resources referenced in this document are included on the following pages. They include:

- *Director's Treatment*: by Sharon Davis, including a Creative Intention and sections on Family, Casting and Rehearsals
- *Anatomy of a Scene*: an insight into the director's rehearsal, discovery and evaluation processes.
- *Interview with the Designers*, Rob Sowinski and Bryn Cullen

# SPENCER

BY KATY WARNER

## DIRECTOR'S TREATMENT

### INTENTION

The key goal for *Spencer* is to show an Australian family that is recognisable in a way that is both delightfully hilarious and horrifyingly uncomfortable. Audiences will leave the theatre having truly felt something powerful while being thoroughly entertained in the process.

Audiences will feel “at home” in our theatre through a design that draws on the classic 3 bedroom, working-class living room, complete with out-dated furniture and photographs that chart the classic milestone of most families. By employing the experience of skilled, comedic actors who can also deliver a powerful emotional punch, the characters will feel so close and familiar, you’ll wonder if Katy Warner has been listening at your family gatherings. And by honouring the tradition of Australian family dramas that have come before such as *Muriel’s Wedding*, *Kath and Kim*, and *The Castle*, *Spencer* will allow audiences an experience of theatre that’s not just a place for middle-class values or aspirations, but a place where the story of a dysfunctional family trying to deal with the everyday dramas of life, can be displayed in all its glorious failure and fun.

Katy Warner’s play has the potential to become a classic of the Australian theatre lexicon and what defines a classic is its ability to transcend time, place, and class and connect to something more basic and familiar in all of us.

## FAMILY

On the surface, Katy has written a play about a very specific family, with very specific interests, living in a fairly specific socio-economic suburb of a football loving city. However, remove the football, social and cultural trappings, and the classic suburban 3 bedroom house, and she's created a family that is awkwardly familiar.

In unpacking *Spencer*, I will be aware of a societal storytelling that mythologises family, childhood, siblings, and parents into a fairly narrow binary; loving and supportive, OR dysfunctional and destructive. But it's the in between - where many of us live - that's full of all the complexity, drama, and humour required for a good play. Crisis, camaraderie, upheaval, disappointment, and chaos, shape our experience and we often find ourselves playing a role whether it be protector, black sheep, clown, victim, hero, or captain.

Familial love is not a clear, straight line. It can be brutal and too honest. Parents can be difficult and selfish while still loving you more than they can say. Siblings are often the ones that draw first blood and their casual taunts linger far longer than that scar you got from riding your bike head first into the tow bar of the caravan (remember that, Mum?). You complain about their frustrating flaws but will passionately defend them to anyone who dares agree with you!

We all have a unique story but I am relieved to hear familiar refrains in other people's family tales that make me think that messy and wayward love might just be ok, if not normal, and certainly worthy fuel for good theatre.

## REHEARSALS

We have three weeks to put this premiere of *Spencer* together – a brand new, 90-minute, eight-scene five-hander. It's not a lot of time. Most new plays at commercial or state theatre companies have the budget for six weeks rehearsal. What will be critical is to balance the time spent on understanding characters needs, wants, and drive with the need to technically rehearse overlapping dialogue, physical gags, and the business of props and costume changes.

The actors will have to do all their own prop management and costume changes themselves with only each other to help. We will need to spend time mapping this track for each actor carefully so we can time everything down to the second and not have too much time between scenes.

Katy likes to use overlapping dialogue and writes it masterfully. It can be a messy nightmare for directors and actors if it's not carefully rehearsed. The actors will need to first understand who they are specifically talking to and why while also having an ear out for where the placement of their next line should land rhythmically. Most of the overlapping sections are arguments when everyone is emotionally charged. This adds another layer of complexity for the actors to manage. They have to be aware of how performance adrenaline and tapping into anger can impact on the collective rhythm and pace.

I plan to spend a fair amount of the last week of rehearsal drilling the lines of the overlapping sections. I expect the actors to find time before every performance to run those sections a few times. It has to become second nature and the only way to do this is to practice over and over again.

Chaos takes practice. I want to show a family unravelling into chaos. I want to give the actors time and space to create real chaos in rehearsal through play and improvisation. Once we do that, we can carefully and methodically plan how it will be recreated every night on stage.

I want to talk about our own families and the places we grew up. I have to be mindful that this can be difficult for some people to talk about so creating a rehearsal room that allows open but safe discussion for the actors is paramount. I feel like these characters are so familiar and that everyone will connect either specifically "My Mum is exactly like Marilyn", or generally "I recognise the character traits of Ben".

Exploring how these characters live in their home and other spaces is vital. What do they do? How do we make this space feel very familiar to the actors and not like a "set"? How do we avoid people just standing or sitting around and talking? There's a lot of dialogue but not a lot of indication in the text or via stage directions as to what the characters are doing. It's acting 101 as far as I'm concerned. People don't just talk. There's always some movement or ripple of movement or trying to hide the ripple.

## CASTING

Actors need to have strong comedic skills - timing, rhythm, physical(?) - yet also be able to tap into truth and authentic human emotions and connections. If the performances are too comedy focused, it'll be a pissstake of working class family. If it's too emotion-led, we will dissolve into a boring version of kitchen sink drama and lose the rhythm and comedy.

Rapid fire dialogue that is full of seemingly nothing:

*BEN He'll be right. He's Scott.*

*JULES You right?*

*BEN Yeah.*

*JULES OK.*

*BEN You right?*

*JULES Suppose.*

Good actors will see beyond the “yeah nahs” to find the unspoken language and emotions that are flowing underneath WITHOUT tripping up the comedy and pace.

I'm very aware that this could easily be a very “white” play and want to avoid just casting people who look like a natural family group together. We already have 2 male actors cast (Lyall Brooks and Jamie Caldwell) but I don't see any issue with casting a POC as either Marilyn, Ian, or Jules. This family is WORKING CLASS. This is more important to capture than ethnicity or even age to an extent. We need actors who can play working class authentically and not make it a clowning exercise.

The heart of the casting lies in **MARILYN**. She needs to be recognisable as that kind of bully parent that is so determined for her kids that she can't see the damage she's doing. We also need to love her. She's not a villain. She's mum. She's doing her best but you can see why all the kids are fuck-ups too. She's been hurt in her life:

*MARILYN I had talents and I could've been something, really could've been something but no one gave a shit about me. Not gonna let that happen to Scotty.*

And Ian left her to raise 3 kids alone. She put everything into making the kids great. It didn't always work but there's one left. And now there's the promise of a new way to be “something” through the arrival of Spencer.

Age range: not hugely important but needs to make some sense in relation to other casting. It's an energy thing. Women aged 55-70. Ethnicity not specific. This woman needs to carry working class.

**JULES** is tough. She had to be. Two brothers in a footy-mad house, nobody really saw her and what makes her special. She had to adapt. She also had to deal with Marilyn's focus on the boys. She's a bit of a fuck up but she knows it and she's trying and just needs a bit of a break to go her way. Her father left the house and left behind broken promises for Jules at an impressionable age, 13. She makes bad choices when it comes to men, seems to go through jobs, and doesn't give value to her own talents and interests. She is bullied by her Mum and her brother Ben but has learned to let it all roll over her and manages to fire back with equal ferocity when she can. She's tender with Scott and reveals only the slightest vulnerability:

**JULES**            *I made lists. I made so many bloody lists. But you never came back.*

Which she very quickly covers with:

**JULES**            *Don't wanna hear it, lan. (Shouts in Ben's direction as she exits)*  
*You can't hide out there forever dickhead.*

**BEN** is your classic Aussie no-hoper/coulda-been. We've seen variations on this character a lot in Australian film, TV, and theatre. Sean Moody in *The Moodys*, Johnny Spiteri in *Gettin' Square*, Doug in *Cosi*, Carl Williams in *Underbelly*. Many of these characters have a criminal bent to them and there's a sense that Ben could be dangerous under the right circumstances:

**BEN**                *Everyone would cop it.*

**SCOTT**            *Yeah.*

**BEN**                *Little old ladies in Volkos. Up it goes – take that bitch. The cops. Fucking pigs. Didn't care. I'd give 'em all the finger. The bird. You know?*

**SCOTT**            *Yeah.*

**BEN**                *But now, now I just look down – Calm Your Farm – and that little birdie goes nowhere.*

He's got aggression, a short attention span, and the need for constant recognition and approval. He also has a large proportion of the comedy in the play. He is set up to fail and fall and manages to pick himself up, brush off the dirt, and keep playing. He resembles Marilyn A LOT in his short fuse and propensity to get lost in petty arguments due to his inability to articulate what's really going on. Ben is a clown and he is what

keeps the playing space active and in motion. Despite the fact that everyone – including himself – says he’s “useless” and “does nothin”.

**SCOTT** is the classic golden child. He’s an up and coming football star so we need to believe that he plays AFL physically. He is also the character that reveals the most internal damage and conflict in the play so the actor needs to be able to tap into that quiet inner rage without demonstrating it openly. He doesn’t say all that much; the first scene is mostly “yeah”, “nah”, “I dunno”, “ok”. Some of this is due to the fact that neither his Mum or brother let him get much out and talk over him a lot, but it’s also a small indicator of his ability to honestly communicate with anyone. We find out later that he hasn’t even talked to Carla, the mother of his son, because he doesn’t know what to say to her. He only reveals this to Jules who seems to be the only family member he can have honest communication with. Eventually.

Scott is the character who gives us the most insight into how this family operates and communicates with each other by being the silent witness or focus of the family chatter and “noise”. He was small when Ian left and grew up with 2 older siblings who had already established a pattern of behaviour and communication that seemingly inoculates them from the turmoil that Scott suffers as a result of not really listening to each other. People speak for him; his Mum:

*MARILYN*     *Scotty’s only home for a bit, just to get some ... ah, you know, some, focus, that’s all. A bit of rest, you know.*

His siblings talk about him or around him a lot during the play:

*BEN*            *You reckon he’ll like you?*

*SCOTT*        *I’m his dad. Of course he’ll like me.*

*JULES*        *He doesn’t even know you Scott.*

*SCOTT*        *But he will.*

*JULES*        *We hate Ian.*

*SCOTT*        *Yeah.*

*BEN*            *Scotty isn’t Ian. Fucking hell.*

*JULES*        *Dunno. We never saw Ian, this kid never saw –*

*SCOTT*        *Spencer. His name is Spencer.*

And his father, Ian, seems more interested in settling on the right grandfather name than having a conversation about how to be a good Dad with his son. The closest he gets is to suggest tennis might be a better option than football:

IAN            *You should play tennis.*

SCOTT        *Maybe. Yeah.*

IAN            *I've seen you play football. On TV.*

SCOTT        *Great, yeah ...*

IAN            *You don't have to play. Obviously. Your choice.*

SCOTT        *Yeah ...*

IAN            *No, really, life is too short –*

SCOTT        *So do whatever the fuck you want?*

IAN            *Sometimes. Yes.*

SCOTT        *I don't want to be like you ...*

**IAN** is the wildcard of the play as a character and needs to bring a very different energy to everyone else - especially Marilyn. That said, we need to be able to connect the dots and see how the kids are influenced by him and his departure from their lives. We don't know that much about him other than he left 18 years ago, he got a younger wife and a young son who have recently left him, and he has travelled a long way to visit the family he left at the request of Scott. He brings his own tent and has fleeting obsessions with ideas or words:

BEN            *Would you stop and would say, holy shit, that's my son. That's my Benjamin. Would you? Would you stop me and say "hello son Ben? Remember me?" Or would you just keep on walking?*

IAN            *Sounds like a song.*

BEN            *It is a fucking song – it's the song of my fucking life.*

IAN            *What's it called? That song. Walk on –*

BEN            *Hey, hey, hey, this is – this is a serious question Ian, you can't ... bloody hell, do you think you would, you know, recognise me cos I've changed, I've changed a hell of a lot –*

IAN            *(starts a poor rendition of the Simple Minds song) Don't you boom – boom – forget about me. Don't, don't, don't, don't –*

BEN            *What?*

IAN            *That's the name of that song. Your song. Don't you – boom boom – forget about –*

BEN            *It's not my song.*

IAN            *You said, before –*

BEN            *Fucking hell, I wasted a sausage roll on you – they're like gold in this house.*

Ian needs to be affable enough not to threaten anyone yet wily enough to have the balls to set up a tent in the living room, ask for one of Marilyn's sausage rolls, and suggest he still owns a share in the house. He's a bit of a loner or free-spirit and maybe just was never meant to be settled down in the suburbs. Or maybe he was run down by Marilyn and the kids. Whatever is going on for Ian underneath his words, there's a lot of scope for the actor to play with how he presents himself. A hippy, a try-hard hip dad, a silver fox, a schemer, or just a run-of-the-mill loser looking for a place to crash for a while.

Ian might've been a smooth operator at one stage but he's lost his edge or maybe just his power over the family. That said, they readily display the open wounds of his departure at the drop of a hat and have been holding onto the hurt and hatred for years. It's part of the rot in the house and if this was a more psychological exploration of this family and less of a dramedy, we would be exploring this mouldy rot metaphorically in the design of the show.

# SPENCER

BY KATY WARNER

## ANATOMY OF A SCENE

*During rehearsals, director Sharon kept a journal of her and the team's work and discoveries. Below is an excerpt from an entry early in the first week:*

Scene One is a classic example of having to investigate what is “happening” in the scene.

We know Ben is referring to one of Scott's old games on TV. There is maybe a remote control? What happens to that remote control? We now have to track the movement of this prop, how it's used and where it needs to be if someone else needs it later.

Ben then talks about how he uses writing things on post-it notes to manage his stress. We took that to an extreme and played with what would it be like if Ben always carried a pack of Post-Its and a Sharpie with him in case he needs to write a new mantra. He's in coach mode with Scott so it makes sense he would share his wisdom with his little bro and write him out a Post-it too (but of course being a typical annoying brother instead of writing out a useful mantra, Ben draws a dick'n'balls). Then we had to figure out how Ben keeps the Post-Its close and came up with the bum bag he wears like Batman's utility belt and contains all sort of things including his trusty Sharpie and Post-It pad.

Scott, meanwhile, is clutching his trusted football and trying to go back to the couch to sleep and block out the noise. Despite the fact that he's trying to break up with his footy career, it's like a familiar habit that keeps him connected to his family and so he's seen clutching, resting on, and playing with the football in the first few scenes.

Then Marilyn arrives. The script just says she enters but doesn't say from where or why. We talked about how often Marilyn's “preparations” for the party and Spencer's arrival are mentioned so this led us to the idea that Marilyn is returning from some shopping to get a few more gifts and party things. This brings her into the house from outside with shopping things and a sense of needing to get things sorted. Tidy up the house, polish the trophies, prepare the sausage rolls, clean. She's constantly doing things to prepare for the arrival of her grandson. The physical things she's doing feeds into the psychological preparation and also gives us moments of comedy and joy like when the unicorn pinata come out of the bag and Ben hangs it up using his dog's chain lead.

This scene is full of motion and activity despite nothing in the script really telling us what to do. We found this through playing around, pushing the limits of what our characters could get away with and still remain believable, and following the authenticity of what the characters are ultimately trying to achieve psychologically and emotionally.

# SPENCER

BY KATY WARNER

## INTERVIEW WITH THE DESIGNERS

*Lauren Bennett, Associate Producer at Lab Kelpie (LK) sat down with Spencer's Set & Lighting Design team Rob Sowinski (RS) and Bryn Cullen (BC) before the show's 2019 national tour. Here is an excerpt of their interview.*

**LK** **Let's start with the overall visual style of the production. You've both designed big, abstract sets for opera and music theatre in the past; were you at all tempted to take the world of Spencer in a non-realistic direction?**

**RS** Well, while there's certainly fertile psychological ground to play with in *Spencer*, this is at its core a comedy-driven family drama. We decided very quickly that this wasn't the show to experiment with abstract or impressionistic design style. The audience needs to walk into the theatre and see a set that could be their own childhood living room or that of a close friend or family member. This is a working class, suburban Australian family that has had their economic and emotional development arrested at the point which Ian left. Marilyn put all her time and resources into the potential of her children and neglected to update her home. It's well cared for and kept but it's old.

**BC** Absolutely. So we started to explore classic brick veneer 3-bedroom homes from the outer suburbs and fibro government housing of the 1960s. The final structure gives us the familiar shapes and tropes many audiences will recognise – archways, tight spaces, an ugly painting whose provenance no one quite remembers but is never thrown out because that's "just where it goes", wood panelling and ceiling light fittings that haven't changed since the mid-80s. Heaven!

**LK** **The script describes the setting only as "the lounge room of Marilyn's house" – tell us a little about your decision to, well, expand out.**

**RS** When I think of my and my friends' childhood homes, and – more importantly – the activity that makes them our homes, I couldn't help but realise the rooms were never completely "separate". A mum's voice would ring out from the front hallway to help with the shopping bags, a dad's face would be seen at the back screen door as he took his boots off, a sibling would lean against the doorframe of the kitchen, cuppa in hand... all of this could be seen and heard from the one spot in the lounge room.

So instead of doorways leading into neutral black “backstage” space, we wanted to show just a small slice of these other connected rooms so the main playing space – the lounge room – was always contextualised within the larger, unseen, family home.

Kitchen lino; screen doors to the backyard that bang shut every time someone goes out or in; someone’s dirty shoes taken off and dumped beneath a hall table, whose lamp is always on, welcoming, because it’s near the otherwise unseen front door.

BC Each of these small details are there to remind the actors of the sense of “home” they need to endow the playing space with while giving clues to the audience of the geographical, cultural, economic, and emotional place of the family.

**LK Once you locked in the shape and era, how did you go about dressing the space?**

BC Hahaha dressing the set was where the real detail was found - and where the audience will have the most fun. Everything needed to look lived-in and familiar. Comfortable but also lumpy, worn, and outdated. This is the small detail that gives us a tiny peek into the family psychology when there isn’t “acting” going on.

RS Lumpy is right – the yellow velvet couch was a terrific find! You can imagine it would have once been the decor pride of Marilyn’s home. The cast also loved that it was only a two-seater couch, which made it awkward and too small for a room full of adult children to relax upon!

**LK Did the cast have any other input into the space?**

RS Absolutely. The walls are adorned with footy, for sure, but also family. Sharon wanted to use real photos from the cast and production team so there was real memory and attachment whenever the actors were on stage and saw them. It also meant we had a collection of various moments from people’s lives at different times. There are wedding photos, school photos, holiday snaps, pets, friends, and sitting on santas knee at the local shopping centre.

BC Oh, and the back wall features those four big black-and-white VFL club team photos from the 1960s and 70s, supplied by [cast member] Fiona Harris’s dad. This was great for her (and her dad when he came to the show!) but also of course gives the audience a sense of the commitment and history for the onstage Prior family in relation to football. I think he also supplied all the old trophies on the cabinet?

RS All except one – the new one that Adam [Fawcett, producer] had made up with an engraving that read, like, “Scott Prior: Best and Fairest, Western Bunyips Under 18s 2009” or something... so it’s there in Marilyn’s hands when she takes it off the shelf to polish it while talking about how “Scotty’s gonna make it...” These little things that only the actors see are so lovely.

**LK Don’t worry, I think the audience has plenty of things to connect to as well! Walking in to the theatre and seeing the washing piled up unfolded on the ironing board made me do an involuntary nostalgia groan!**

BC Yes! Definitely a nod to one of the tasks Marilyn has probably asked Ben to do while she’s out - and then the ironing board can be used for various other things in the play – a gift wrapping bench, a party food table, things like that. Just like ours was growing up.

RS My guilty favourite piece – and I wish I could say this was our idea but it was actually one of the cast who brought it in – is the old Ab-Swing Pro in the corner for the first scene or two. Instantly recognisable to anyone who’s been fascinated by those “As Seen on TV” infomercials, it’s seen first being used (like probably so many across the country) to hang drying underwear-

BC -and then briefly used for its actual purpose by Ben who gives up as quickly as most of us who bought something off the telly, inspired to get fit, only to abandon it a week later!

RS I love the kitchen wall; there’s a small part of the kitchen we see from the audience and that is focused on the kitchen notice board where Marilyn writes lists for the shopping, attaches postcards, hangs take-away menus, and leave messages for Ben. The walls also have child’s paintings or colouring in from when the kids were young. Another sign that not much has changed in 20 years or so.

BC Oh, and the green vinyl dining chair! It sticks out into the kitchen doorway, suggesting the presence of a small breakfast table around the corner. It highlights the aged (but definitely not “cool-retro”) feel of the house, but it’s also used in a practical way throughout the show – for Ben to stand on when hanging decorations, for Ian to make himself at home on even though he clearly isn’t welcome, for Marilyn to collapse into when things go to hell...

**LK** **That's actually an interesting point: you ended up with a huge range of "fun" props and "emotion-stoking" props... What about props or furniture that doubled up as practical solutions to problems or had other innovative uses?**

RS Sure – with the couch the only other seating in the room, the ottoman to the side provided the actors with another place to sit when needed. It's easily movable on the carpet, and it also has an internal section where props for later scenes are hidden.

BC Similarly the corner hutch unit; it features those prized trophies and awards that show us the household's central footy-focus, as well as showing us a few other cultural influences in Marilyn's life – board games, Stephen King novels, and a space-ship looking stereo system from the late 1990s that's always on the radio in the background. But there's a large closed section that contains mountains of party debris, which is flung into the space in a transition later in the play as the house descends into mayhem.

**LK** **What about the table and ceiling lamps you mentioned – are they also practical in lighting the space?**

RS Funnily enough, even though they're called prac – or practical – lamps, they don't actually have a "practical" purpose; they don't cast much light, or not enough to be effective on stage, but they do provide visible light "sources" and glows that look right at home in... well, a home.

BC As well as the table lamp in the hall and the overhead glass-fitting light above the couch – both with 1970s feel that nod to the lack of décor update - the prac lights also include a floor lamp - one of those horrific, cheap black stand with triangle shade things that are purchased from Kmart for practical and cost reasons and not aesthetic pleasure – and even the old grey stereo system on the hutch (with cassette and three CD stacker!) whose neon green and yellow display flashes through its "way cool" 90s cycle the whole play. We found that one on the side of the road -

RS -and properly tested and tagged for safety!

BC YES! The same went for the genuine 70s lamps – test, tag, handle carefully - you don't mess around with electrical stuff!

**LK    Important to remember! What about the “real” lighting, if we can call it that – the theatre lighting design? Tell me a little more about that.**

RS    Absolutely. Like the set and set dressing, the lighting is fairly naturalistic and needs to serve to show the time of day in this interior of the house. The play takes place over a weekend and we go from day to evening to late night, to bright morning. The most dramatic shift in lighting occurs in Scene 7 when the house descends into drunken chaos and mess while Ian bangs on the back door to be let back into the house. Marilyn, Ben, and Jules and drunk and listening to music and talking about Scotty. The lights start quite low but gradually come up in brightness as the scene progresses for the practical reason that we need to see what's going on. The gradual increase is timed to coincide with the mood, conversation, and escalation of argument that occurs between the characters during the scene.



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