

MINEFIELDS AND MINISKIRTS



TERENCE O'CONNELL

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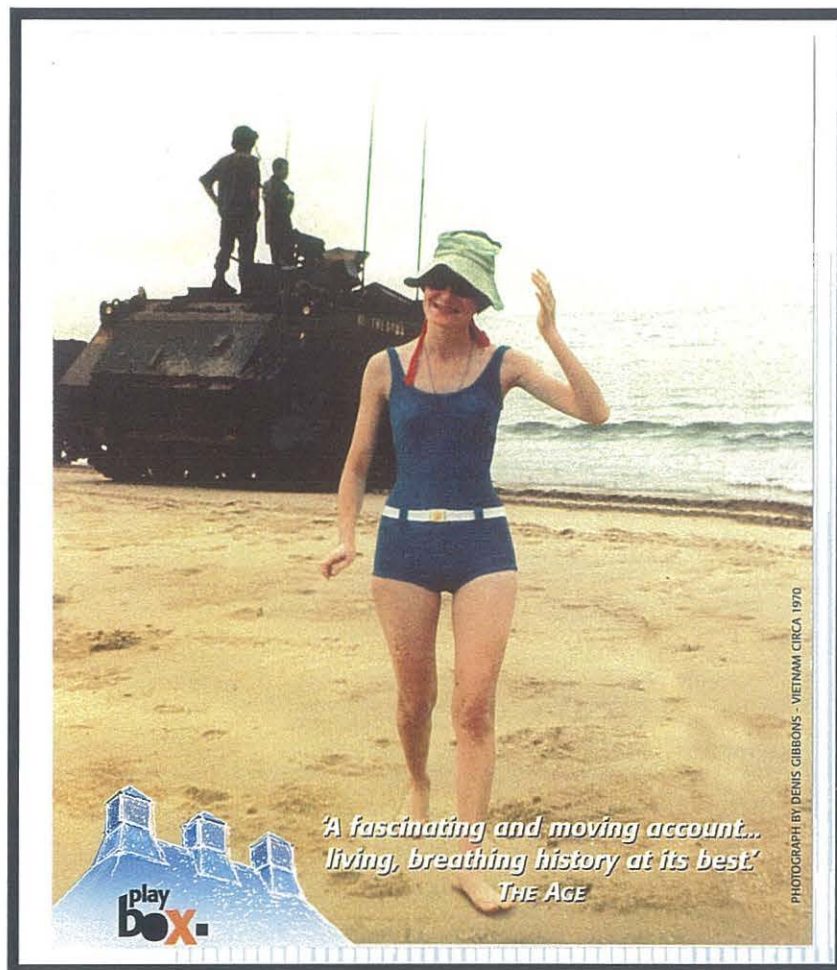
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Malthouse Theatre presents:

Minefields & Miniskirts

Adapted by Terence O'Connell
From the book by Siobhan McHugh



EDUCATION NOTES

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MINEFIELDS & MINISKIRTS

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EDUCATION NOTES

Malthouse Education has prepared these Education Notes to assist students and teachers in their study of the play. They are not a document that provides a definitive statement about *Minefields & Miniskirts*. Malthouse Education very much sees the need for students to respond to theatre in order to address the demands of curriculum, but we also want students to discuss their own experiences and understandings of *Minefields & Miniskirts*. We hope that students will actively explore the play in relation to; its style, its story, its stagecraft, the themes and issues that they believe a contemporary Australian play such as this one explores, and to discuss its relevance to their lives and to their future, particularly in the light of current world events.

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Impressions: Australians in Vietnam

Overview of Australian military involvement in the Vietnam War, 1962 - 1973

Introduction

Australia's military involvement in the Vietnam War was the longest in duration of any war in Australia's history. That involvement lasted over eleven years, between August 1962 and June 1973. The Australian commitment consisted predominantly of Army personnel, but significant numbers of Air Force and Navy personnel and some civilians also took part. According to the Nominal Roll of Australian Vietnam Veterans, more than 59,000 Australians served in Vietnam during the period of the war.



Special Air Service patrol aboard an Iroquois helicopter, 1967
[Joshua Riches]
(P1592.015)

A total of 508 Australians died in Vietnam: 478 Army personnel; 14 RAAF personnel; 9 Navy personnel; and 7 civilians. These include six Australian servicemen who were declared Missing in Action during the War. These six are in fact believed to have been Killed in Action but have no known graves.

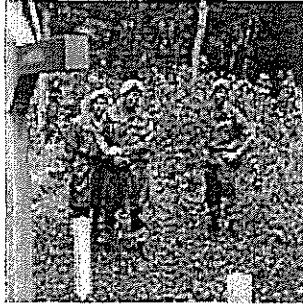
Australia's commitment, although substantial in terms of its military capabilities, was small in comparison with the military contributions of the United States. Over 3 million Americans served in the War and the total number of American personnel in Vietnam reached a peak of over 540,000 in 1968. About 58,000 Americans died in the Vietnam War and over 2,000 were listed as Missing in Action.



Loading a shell into a 105mm pack howitzer, September 1965 (Left to right: Gunners A K Holloway and G L Baker and Bombardier R Humphries, 105th Field Battery)
[Sergeant Mick Shannon]
(SHA/65/0012/VN)

The scale of Vietnamese losses on both sides of the conflict was enormous. About 224,000 South Vietnamese military personnel and over 415,000 South Vietnamese civilians were killed. Over 1 million North Vietnamese and Viet Cong were killed and more than 300,000 were declared Missing in Action. Some 4 million Vietnamese civilians (10 per

cent of the total wartime population) were killed or wounded. Overall, the total number of North and South Vietnamese killed and wounded was approximately ten times the total number of American casualties.



Australian soldiers at the Battle of Long Tan Memorial on the fourth anniversary of the battle, 18 August 1970
[Sergeant Peter Ward]
(WAR/70/0689/VN)

Chronological overview

In September 1946 the Vietnamese Communist Party leader, Ho Chi Minh, proclaimed Vietnam's independence from French colonial rule, while France proceeded to establish the state of Vietnam, eventually installing the former emperor Bao Dai at its head. The First Indochina War began in late 1946 and lasted until May 1954, when Viet Minh forces defeated the French army at Dien Bien Phu.

In July 1954 the Geneva Accords were signed to conclude the Indochina War and Vietnam was temporarily partitioned, at the 17th parallel, into a Communist-ruled north, backed by the USSR and China, and non-Communist south, supported by the United States. Under the terms of the accords national elections were to be held by July 1956 to decide on the unification of the country. When the elections were stalled, North Vietnamese forces and Communist guerrillas resumed an insurgency war of terror and political indoctrination against the government and people of South Vietnam.

The involvement of Australian forces in Vietnam was a gradual process of escalating commitment which took place over a period of several years against a background of Cold War concerns with regional security and fear of Communist expansion. The cornerstone of Australian defence planning in the early 1960s was 'forward defence', a concept which complemented the United States policy of 'containment' of Communism in south-east Asia and embraced Australia's obligations under the South-East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO).

In 1961 and again in 1962 the South Vietnamese government requested general aid from the Australian government to improve security and assist in economic and social development. In August 1962 a small team of thirty Australian Army advisers was sent to Vietnam to operate within the United States military advisory system of over 2,000 advisers already there. They assisted in training army elements of the Republic of Vietnam but were under instructions not to accompany Vietnamese forces on operations. The Australian Army Training Team Vietnam became the most highly decorated Australian unit in the war, receiving all four Victoria Crosses awarded, the Republic of Vietnam Cross of Gallantry with Palm Unit Citation and the United States Army Meritorious Unit Commendation. By January 1965 the number of Australian advisers had been increased

3.

to 100 within a total strength of over 23,000 American advisers, deployed in training centres all over South Vietnam; despite this, the Viet Cong continued to grow in support and strength and the tide of the war was turning against the South.

Following the arrival of the first American combat troops in Vietnam in March 1965, Prime Minister Menzies announced on 29 April the decision to commit an Australian battalion to service there. This unit was established in Vietnam by June 1965 and served under the operational control of the US 173 Airborne Brigade (Separate) as its third battalion. In September 1965 the battalion was expanded to a battalion-group of 1,400 men with supporting elements including artillery, engineers, a reconnaissance flight and logistic support. Based at Bien Hoa, north of Saigon (present day Ho Chi Minh City), the battalion and the expanded battalion-group carried out counter-insurgency operations with combined US forces in the III Corps military area until its return to Australia in June 1966. Between 1965 and 1966 the rapid build-up of American forces in Vietnam to more than 385,000 personnel slowed the Communist advances and stabilised the situation in the country.

In March 1966 the Australian commitment was expanded to an independent task force of two battalions with combat and logistic support. The task force totalled 4,500 men including 500 national servicemen from the first intake under the National Service scheme introduced in November 1964. The task force established its base at Nui Dat in the heart of Phuoc Tuy province (present day Ba Ria-Vung Tau province). Although under the nominal control of the American II Field Force Vietnam, the task force retained a degree of operational independence, enabling it to practise its distinctively Australian approach to counter-insurgency. This it did very effectively. In August 1966, at Long Tan, an overwhelming defeat was inflicted on a massed enemy formation by a single Australian company supported by artillery. By the end of 1966 the task force was expanding its area of operations and consolidating control over areas of Phuoc Tuy province.

Throughout 1967 and 1968 the task force was steadily increased in size and effectiveness with the addition of a third battalion, tanks and a Civil Affairs Unit. From the beginning of 1969 to mid-1970, a peak force of more than a third of Australia's available combat strength was deployed in Vietnam. It comprised elements from all three services: a three-battalion Army task force with combat and logistic support; an Army advisory team; RAAF helicopters, medium bombers and transport aircraft; and RAN guided-missile destroyers and helicopters. In this period of heaviest commitment more than 8,500 Australian service personnel (over 7,000 of them Army personnel) were deployed in Vietnam.

The escalation of Western military commitment to Vietnam was accompanied by a gradual rise in popular opposition, both in Australia and abroad, to involvement in the War. For the first few years, the Australian commitment in Vietnam was supported by the majority of Australian people. However by the late 1960s that support had been substantially eroded. The apparent reversal of the Tet Offensive in early 1968 and the commencement of formal peace talks in Paris in 1969 provoked worldwide opposition to continuing involvement in the War. Australian opposition reached a peak in the large Moratorium rallies in Australian cities in 1970 and 1971.

In June 1969, as the South Vietnamese armed forces assumed greater defence responsibility, President Nixon announced that the US would begin to withdraw its forces. Following further US withdrawals in April

1970, Prime Minister Gorton announced a reduction of Australian forces by one battalion.

Throughout 1971 and 1972 the reduction of Australia's forces continued under the administration of Prime Minister McMahon. By the end of 1971 the Australian Army presence had been reduced to 2300 personnel. By mid-1972 less than 200 Australian personnel remained and in December 1972 Prime Minister Whitlam announced the withdrawal of the final contingent. On 26 February 1973 Prime Minister Whitlam announced the establishment of diplomatic relations with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North) while retaining diplomatic recognition for the Republic of Vietnam (South). The last elements of the Australian Army left Vietnam in June 1973.

After the withdrawal of Australian and US troops the war escalated, with the Soviet-equipped North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong increasingly winning the upper hand. In April 1975, after a victorious campaign, the North Vietnamese Army entered Saigon and the President of the Republic of Vietnam surrendered unconditionally. The formal announcement of the reunification of the two Vietnams was made in 1976 with the declaration of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

Evaluation

There was a conspicuous gap between the 'hawkish' political rhetoric of successive Liberal-Country Party governments and the actual level of Australian military commitment to the Vietnam War. Australia never undertook a commitment to the Vietnam War either comparable with that of its larger ally, the United States, or indeed ever approaching the level requested by the Americans. The rhetoric of Prime Minister Holt's much-quoted slogan, 'All the way with LBJ!', was never matched by reality.

Less than one-tenth of the total Australian forces (86,000 personnel) were in Vietnam at the period of maximum commitment. During the war the Australian armed forces constituted about 0.7 per cent of the Australian population, and Australian defence expenditure averaged between 4 and 4.5 per cent of Gross National Product. By way of comparison, the American armed forces constituted 1.6 per cent of the total population and American defence expenditure averaged 9 per cent of Gross National Product during the same period.

The official estimate of the cost of the War, above the normal cost of maintaining the armed forces in Australia, was \$43 million at the time of peak involvement between 1967 and 1970, amounting to a total of \$218.4 million from 1962 to March 1972.

Of over 804,000 Australian men who registered for National Service, almost 64,000 (about 8 per cent) were called up. Less than one third of those called up, 18,000 (2 per cent of the total registered) served in Vietnam, where they constituted no more than 50 per cent of each Army unit.

Ashley Ekins
Official History Unit
Australian War Memorial

Source: www.awm.gov.au

CONVERSATION WITH THE CAST OF 'MINEFIELDS & MINISKIRTS'

Robyn Arthur	-	Eve, the volunteer/aid worker
Tracy Bartram	-	Ruth, the journalist
Debra Byrne	-	Cathy, the nurse
Tracy Mann	-	Margaret, the veteran's wife
Wendy Stapleton	-	Sandy, the entertainer

As actors, how did you initially respond to the concept of 'Minefields and Miniskirts'?

Tracy M:

Well I was very thrilled, first of all to be working with Terence O'Connor, whom I know all of us have worked with several times before - I've worked with him mostly on straight theatre and plays. Also, Minefields & Miniskirts is a wonderful piece of work for women of a certain age which is rare. It has equal roles in a strong piece of theatre that has something to say about society and war and humanity.

So, you believe that the concept raises issues that are very important?

Tracy M:

Oh, yes. It will open up things for so many people.

Wendy:

It's also interesting in as much as, regardless of our ages – we're pretty close – but we're all familiar in some respect with the Vietnam War, with the subject matter itself. It's not like it was something that happened one hundred years ago or a story told by our grandparents. We actually all were around when it was happening. So, with all of us, there is some memory of Vietnam affecting us in individual ways because we all were here at that time in Australia.

Robyn:

I actually have just been to Vietnam, in May this year, just to have a feeling, a sense of the place. I wanted to go to the museums and see the graphic evidence of this terrible war that was raged on these poor people. However, getting back to what Wendy said, it wasn't actually until I came back that I realised, let's say until I was about 21, for about ten years of that time the Vietnam War was happening. I had cousins there I had friends who were conscripted. It was half of the first twenty years of my life. So the play is really resonating for me. We would all have stories of some connection, of friends or relatives who had been there and, of course, with what is happening in the world now, the same thing is being repeated in Iraq. That's why I think it's fantastic that schools are coming to see this play.

Debra:

For me, as a young girl I always felt that there was a type of promotion of the Vietnam War and the myths that grew out of it as it being a sort of 'sexy' war. There was a lot of sexy, groovy music attached to it and guys, GIs and gorgeous girls.

Wendy:

And the drugs and all that kind of thing that came out of it like open talk about LSD.

Debra:

Yes. You know, reflecting on the Second World War, it was portrayed as a straight conservative kind of war but Vietnam had this type of 'swing' surrounding it. So it's really good to be able to look at and see the truth of it, well really the truth of any war.

Tracy B:

I responded differently to most of you because I've never done straight theatre so when Terence mentioned this to me I actually burst into tears and said, 'Oh, I can't do this'. I've only ever done comedy, I've only ever done live shows and felt I wasn't equipped to ever be able to do it. That was quite some time ago now, but once I knew who was going to be in the cast I was really excited to be working with such great women. But the other thing for me, I felt similarly to Deborah, that the women who went to Vietnam had never really been mentioned, apart from the nurses. The women who lived lives like 'Margaret', married to a Vietnam veteran, we've never heard those stories and it actually reminded me of an art show called 'Completing the Picture'.

The exhibition was about all the women in the Heidelberg School in Victoria and I saw it about fifteen years ago and had no idea that there were so many prolific female artists. It was only because the writing and recording had been done by men and the women had never been mentioned. It wasn't that the women in the Heidelberg School were any better or worse than the men, they were just there but we didn't know about them! So, it was the same for me with this play. I was too young and I lived a fairly sheltered existence. My parents didn't really discuss anything so I knew the war was on because there were things on the walls at school but was rather ignorant about what was going on, so this play, to me, is a way of actually saying that there were lots of women over there and their stories need to be acknowledged. They really led the most horrific lives. Some of them were just stoned and partying on a lot of the time – my character was one of those – but like the nurse, Cathy, just seeing these people dying day after day.

It's always been the men who were seen as heroes and I think that that's just been the theme in our patriarchal society and it's just so wrong! So, I was really excited about the opportunity for all of us to tell the story of this really strong part of our culture. The women who did it were old enough to be our mums or big sisters maybe.

Robyn:

Yes, more big sisters I think. My character says in the play, 'It was my 22nd birthday'. Had I been three years older I would have been there. I had friends who were that age who were called up through the 'lottery', the ballot system. Perhaps this generation may not be aware of how that operated.
[*See resource material for description of the conscription system]

Wendy:

And also that that system covered a period of years too that covered many people's lives.

Tracy B:
It must have been terrifying!

Wendy:
It was on the news.

Tracy:
Oh my God!

Robyn:
It was a bit like Tattslotto.

Wendy:
In fact both my brothers had to sit there and watch it and they were both the right age but they both missed out.

Debra:
Yes, they just dropped the balls and read out the names. That's how it happened.

Robyn:
Getting back to what you were talking about Tracy, the book is terrific, the book that Terence has based the play on (Minefields and Miniskirts by Siobhan McHugh). There were about a thousand Australian women in Vietnam, about eight thousand from America.

Tracy B:
For our population a thousand was a lot of women.

Robyn:
Yeah, and we are an amalgam of about fifty women's stories, merged into five characters and you feel that you have this baton and you've got to run with it and tell these stories. I feel a great honour about being given that baton.

Tracy B:
And a responsibility, an honour too, even a privilege.

As Robyn has just discussed, the characters in the play are based on real life people. How has that affected your approach in the rehearsal room to the development of the roles? Have you sought to portray a truth?

Debra:
The truth really.

Robyn:
The characters I play, Eve, went across with the World Council of Churches. She was an aid worker and a missionary. So the way you play it and the way you perceive that person is important. I was brought up in the Catholic School system myself so I certainly understand who this person is and had an aunt who was a nun so that helped. But, because you are an amalgam of people, I know that there are certain other people's stories from the book that my character is enacting or telling. Therefore, in a sense you have to make that character live for you in the particular world you are in, as Terence calls it, the world of imagination. Where the play is set doesn't really have an exact time.

Wendy:

It doesn't have an exact time and we're not playing exact people from the book. As Robyn said, we're a mix of different people doing all those jobs. So really, to develop the character we have to take from what information we can get but also we have to actually develop a specific character for the purposes of this play.

Robyn:

But from within the stories, and when you really look at them, I think, 'What clues are in here?' Something in the book says, 'I was searching for a girls' own adventure', and that tells me something or, 'I've had my time of rebellion' and I think, 'What did she mean by that?' There are those questions that you have to ask yourself throughout the process. Whatever your answer is, and it can be anything. That is going to help form your character.

Debra:

My character, Cathy the nurse, talks about a lot of different soldiers she had experiences with and the thing that I'm looking at all the time is that each time I talk about a soldier it's not just what is wrong with him, what happened to him, what physical injuries he has, but why does she remember that particular soldier? Why that one? What did he say to her? What was his level of fear or homesickness that really kept that soldier in her mind amongst so many? And then it makes the soldier become for me, the actor, a real person just not another soldier who has a heavily bandaged arm, and it's good to find those connections with people and characters off a page.

Is that kind of exploratory and discovery process encouraged by the director, Terence O'Connell?

Debra:

Very much so.

Wendy/Robyn:

Oh, yes.

Tracy B:

Oh, you've got to find it yourself. He won't tell us. 'Is that what you want?'. 'I don't know' he says, 'I don't know. What do you think?'

Debra:

I'd like to talk about that process because I've not actually worked with Terence apart from on television when I just sang a song and really he just said, 'Walk down those stairs' – he said it very well mind you - and so I've not really had a working relationship with Terence until now and something I've never really done is straight theatre. My work has always been about musical score. And the other thing I've never done is a play that is new. Everything I've ever performed in has been performed before and they come to you fairly much as a blue print and you have to say and do everything that, for example, Fantine did in Les Miserables in America. Of course, what you bring to it, your touch, your colours, is your work, but basically you don't move because you feel like it, you move there because that's the lighting cue. So it's wonderful to have the trust of someone who says that this is their baby, it has been their baby for a long time and it's about an important subject and that we are going to be trusted to lift it up off the paper. That for me is such a wonderful gift.

Wendy:

And we still don't really know at this stage where we're going! We're still getting there.

Robyn:

That's right because the style of this play is not dialogue in a play, responding to scenes set up like the structure of a play. It isn't like that at all. They are essentially monologues, but I think that what's starting to develop is the sense that we are almost speaking to each other because of the way Terence is directing us. We can sense each other there as we speak and the relationships almost physically. I almost feel like we're having conversations when in fact we're not.

Tracy B:

It's interesting, I don't think any of us said this last week but it's probably appropriate to say it now, but after the first week of rehearsal we walked away and I thought, 'We actually did so well for a first week'. I feel that there is an underlying feeling of enormous respect for each other, some of us know each other, some of us don't, but we all know of each other. There has been a connection, which is Terence because we all met through him, and there is enormous trust and I think we all really admire each other as performers and it's wonderful to be working on that level. I have had a very intimate professional relationship with Terence because I worked one on one with him with my own shows, particularly the last one. I spent every day with him for about four months to the point where we got so sick of each other!

But this is a completely different process and some of it is down to the fact that it is such fantastic material.

Could we talk about the use of music and song in this play. What role do you think it plays? How does it contribute to the process of character development?

Wendy:

The songs are taken from that particular era and they are songs that definitely reflect Vietnam. There's *Leaving on a Jet Plane*, *Circle Game*, *Saigon Bride*, and of course, *Will you still love me Tomorrow* and *One Tin Soldier*. These songs were all being played at the time of the Vietnam War so it is very much, for anyone in the audience who was around then, it will very much put them in that time. But, for students, who weren't around in those days it will still be very relevant if they really listen to the lyrics.

Debra:

And they evoke such feeling. For example, *One Tin Soldier* has such a wonderful naivety in it, not so much the lyric, but the actual music. It's like a very sophisticated nursery rhyme. So, it's that innocence that at that moment we really want to be focussed on. I think *One Tin Soldier* really captures that feeling. So, even if they don't know the song, they will get a real sense of what is meant. It's like smelling something that really takes you somewhere - you remember.

Wendy:

The songs that Terence has chosen aren't there just for the sake of the era, lyrically they reflect what we are intending as well. So, it's not just taking a song and saying, 'Well that was being played during that time' - they are relevant. So if the students aren't aware of that fact that that particular music was being

played during the time of Vietnam, the lyrics will connect them. That was a very important part of the selection of songs.

Debra:

I actually think sometimes that you are moving in and out of a song. It's like actually trying to find the way that your character moves in and out of the song and when you are a singer it's sometimes hard not to just become a singer in this context. You have to sort of fight against it, or rather dissociate from the fact that you are a singer and not just *sing* the song but actually *tell* the song, tell the song's story.

Robyn:

In fact not even think about the singing.

Debra:

Yes, exactly. Try and remove the fact that you are singing it. As far as the song helping me I actually think that at the moment it is a bit of a challenge in relation to the story. I think it's wonderful that those songs are in the play but, if they're helping my character at the moment, I'm not aware of it yet.

Tracy M:

I just want to return to the point about '*finding the character*' that we referred to before. Just the way that I work as an actor, I've never just thought, 'Oh, I'm finding the character'. You are an instrument and it's in the text and you use the words and you hear it. I do a lot of dictionary work. I look up words even though I think I know what they mean but I look up those words and it adds something to it. Even just a simple word like 'work'. What does that mean? What does the Macquarie Dictionary say about 'work'? I like to write those things next to my script because that informs the way that I perhaps say the word or give it some importance or some weight.

I think it's also a matter of perhaps you're sitting in a chair, you're listening to other people and then I start to speak and my character, Margaret, is coming. I often find my 'character' – and I'm saying that in parenthesis deliberately because I often wonder what the word character means – comes when I'm washing dishes at home. It will often happen in week three of rehearsal. It's often that kind of thing that somehow, suddenly she's there. Ahhh, she's there. So it's about listening and it coming slowly. We were talking about this just yesterday, Robyn and I, and there are some speeches that I just can't learn yet. The rape speech – I'm not ready yet. I can't do it because it's not just a matter of learning lines it's a matter of feeling it, honouring it.

Robyn:

The time will come.

Tracy M:

Yes, it's a timing thing. You're ready now for that bit to come in. So, it's a strange organic process. You have to live with it.

Debra:

We were talking about that this morning and I love that thing that happens, like when you first see the script and...

Tracy B:

You panic!

Debra:

No, I don't panic. I just love that whole process of going, 'How do I say that? I don't know how to say that' and after a couple of days you're saying it and it's coming out. Then you look further down in the script that you haven't really studied yet and you say, 'How am I going to say that? How do I say that?' It's like that; you don't really even notice it. It just all starts to become and all of sudden, the things that you looked at thinking, 'How am I going to say that?', it's not *you* saying it, it's Cathy saying it and so then it all just begins to make sense. So rather than me sitting there and saying, 'How am *I* going to say that?' you begin to take on Cathy, and the words become part of the taking on.

Tracy B:

Yes, they do inhabit you.

Debra:

Yes, I love it! I just love how it just all starts to evolve.

Tracy B:

I was saying to Robyn this morning, I've been feeling just really low about this because my character's not very likeable at all. She's not! She's a bitch! So, again, there are so many challenges for me as a performer.

Robyn:

I don't think she's a bitch at all!

Tracy B:

No, perhaps not, but she's very self-centred, very self-absorbed. Which is, after all, what we all are!

Debra:

But that's not being bitch. That's young and that's not knowing the consequences of what you do.

Tracy B:

But the point I'm making is that, from my experience, I don't have any laughs in this; there's no laughter relief. It's all very much this young girl over there probably banging her brains out, taking lots of drugs and getting far too drunk, sitting around waiting for something to happen. So she's guilty of shame. I don't think she's very likeable at all. I don't know, I may change my view in week three but I said this morning that this thought has just been sitting with me. I watched *Apocalypse Now* on the weekend then I watched *The Quiet American* and I realised that I had avoided watching all this war stuff my whole life. I never wanted to look at it, I can't stand violence, it makes me vomit, I cannot look at it and I had to look at it. It was really distressing and it's still really distressing me. But that's how I'm finding my way in to seeing what it was like so I can imagine her being there.

Debra:

And why she disassociated with it. Why she took so many drugs.

Tracy B:

She self-medicated! Nuked herself!

Wendy:

There's a major factor here though. Think about the different age groups that we are. My character was sixteen when she went and she put her age up. I

don't even know how she got there! How do you get to go to a war zone when you're sixteen years of age? Do you know what I mean? And the same thing with your character, Tracey. She's what, eighteen? Nineteen? They're all really young! And the boys who went – that just doesn't bear thinking about.

Debra:

It was another time though. At twenty-one back then, you were supposed to be married. What I'm saying is that back then eighteen is not eighteen as we view kids now. At eighteen now they are still babies. Back then, if you were twenty-one and not married and you weren't having babies, your dad was saying, 'Hey listen! You should be moving out! You're supposed to be married by now!'

Wendy:

All I know is that my brothers were both eligible to go and they were absolute kids. They were still playing with their mates and doing lots of silly stuff, they were babies. They were both fortunate that their marbles, or their numbers didn't come up. It was really like Tattsлото! Here you are! Lucky you, you're going! They both missed out, fortunately.

How is the set and costume design serving the play and the story for you?

Tracy M:

At present it is just markings on the floor.

Debra:

And a tiny little beautiful thing that we've all wanted to take home.

Wendy:

We've seen a miniature.

Is there any sense, even at this early stage, of how it will work for you?

Tracy B:

It's going to be so visually beautiful.

Robyn:

And very evocative, and having just been in Vietnam four week ago, I had one look at that set and instantly thought how it echoes the place. Catherine [Cat Raven, the designer] has been in Vietnam too. Of course the style of the costumes too, it's the same, very beautiful.

Tracy M:

It will be beautiful to look at!

Tracy B:

The costumes are gorgeous.

Debra:

And maybe it was why it was thought of as a sexy war because it was an exotic place with exotic colours, whereas the Second World War just had flashes of the grey of Germany and cold and never took on a sexy look. Whereas Vietnam is just so exotic and it could look, and I don't want to be disrespectful, but it could look sexy to somebody to somebody who never was there. When all they're seeing are the colours and the palm trees and the GIs sitting around with their shirts open.

Wendy:

The sound will be amazing too because, apart from the music, obviously there will be lots of sound effects. Things that will be heard that will just really make your spine tingle when we're all talking about our own individual stories. Things such as helicopters and there will be fans that will start to look like the blades and the sounds of the choppers and of the crazy market stalls. It will be very vivid.

Debra:

Each time we get given another layer, another thing to play with you can just feel the whole thing growing and growing. It's beautiful.

Wendy:

Gee I hope I don't vague out on stage. Just sit there going oh, that's nice.

Tracy M:

You won't. Trust me.

What would you like an audience to be thinking when they leave the theatre after having seen Minefields and Miniskirts?

Wendy:

That we're all marvellous! Of course I play the entertainer - that's the entertainer speaking!

Robyn:

I'd love them to think, 'How can we make this a peaceful world? How can we achieve peace on this planet?' Okay, that's a big one but we have just got to take responsibility for this!

Debra:

War is big so why can't we present the big issues? I was driving here this morning and there was a car next to me with a sticker on it that said, 'Imagine Peace'. And I thought, 'Oh, yes!' Maybe if we all, just occasionally, imagined peace we may create a lot more of it but we don't imagine peace enough. None of us do, as a collective, sit and imagine peace like people do when they meditate and create an incredible aura and atmosphere. If a group of people do sit and only think on peace, it would have a wonderful focus.

So for all of you, does this play have an anti-war message?

All:

Yes!

Tracy B:

And what I've got loud and clear after watching that stuff on Vietnam is that we've learnt nothing from the Vietnam War.

Wendy:

There's that fabulous line that Robyn's character says, 'No one's going to win'.

Tracy B:

No! They're not going to win.

Wendy:

Her character can tell from day one when she arrived that no one's going to win; there was never going to be a winner there.

Tracy B:

What I get from watching the films is that the Vietnamese people are almost saying, 'Oh, the bloody Americans are here. They're like flies. Let's just swat them away. We wish they'd go!' The Vietnamese are keep on living their lives and doing their work and being Buddhist and trying to live their own existence and here we are tagging onto the coat tails of America in Iraq yet again! We haven't learnt! And it's all been completely stuffed up again

Tracy M:

It's been fascinating for me to read and do research on the war in Vietnam because I hadn't thought about it until day one rehearsal because I didn't want to. I like to arrive fresh. It depends what the job is but this one was like, 'No, not ready yet to do that', so now I'm quite enjoying reading things about the war and it's despicable. It was manufactured. It was a designed war for America and once again, it still is, it's still happening. So, it's important that this play opens that dialogue. For me, reading and seeing the films as well has given weight to the play. It's important to say, yes women were there, and to acknowledge that, but why war?

Wendy:

Or asking the question, 'What are we doing there?' What were they all doing there? I was even saying that my dad went to war and I guess a few other's father's went to war, in fact my dad was on the Kokoda Trail [in Papua New Guinea]. The fact is that Australia was being invaded in the Second World War. It was invaded in Darwin, bombed. Submarines came into Sydney Harbour. The Japanese submarines actually got into Sydney Harbour, and our fathers, even though it was a horrible thing that they had to do, there was at least some feeling that they were protecting their country and their families. They really could see that the danger was real. In Vietnam, no one wanted us there. It is the same as Iraq. What are we doing there?

Debra:

I'd like people to be thinking, especially when we are talking to students, to know that the theatre is an amazing place to tell stories and for them to want to continue to want to come back to the theatre and hear more stories and to experience live theatre. Also, to know that if they have a story to tell there is a place already there to bring that to life. It doesn't just have to stay on the paper. I think the theatre is a wonderful experience for anybody, it doesn't matter what you go and see. You are amongst other people who are sharing the same thing. I would like the theatre to get an injection of enthusiasm from young people.

Wendy:

To open up dialogue as well.

Robyn:

It's that ability that theatre has to change people's lives. To change their attitudes. To open the door.

Tracy B:

There are so many people, especially students, who have never been to the theatre. I live in the country and there are kids there who have never been to Melbourne, let alone been to the theatre. I think that's true. Theatre does change people's lives.

Tracy M:

And that they've had a nice night out too!

All:

Yeah! Absolutely.

Tracy M:

That they've enjoyed it and they've had a good night. That they've seen strong women perform. They've heard some good music. That it's sent them on a journey and that they've had fun and been moved.

Debra:

Absolutely! That they've felt the tingle that comes with good theatre.

*Interview with Director/Playwright of Minefields and
Miniskirts, Terence O'Connell*

What was your initial inspiration for adapting the book Minefields and Miniskirts into a play?

I was initially asked/commissioned to write a screenplay for a feature film on the subject of Australian female entertainers in Vietnam and it never got up. I had also been doing a play called *Certified Male* nationally and internationally with an all male cast and thought it would be great to do a show with an all female cast. So I was looking for an idea and stumbled across the book and straight away I thought there's a terrific show in there with great characters. This is also the start of a series of theatre productions I'm going to be doing based upon true Australian stories.

Did the author of Minefields and Miniskirts, Siobhan McHugh, play any role in adapting the story into a play?

I contacted her, but she hasn't had anything to do with adapting the book into a piece of theatre, she didn't want to. Eventually said to me, 'Well I trust you, I know that my book is not a piece of theatre and I know that you're going to have to change it, so I will see it on opening night'. I hope that it's going to be a great night for her.

Can you describe the process of adapting a book, into a play?

My first task was deciding which characters I wanted to develop from the book. I knew I wanted a nurse, an entertainer, a journalist, a church volunteer and a fifth character to be the wife of a Vietnam vet, who is living her own Vietnam because she's married to it.

Then, because there were so many different stories in the book, I had to try and pick out elements that gave me a beginning, middle and end. Siobhan would have interviewed the women for hours, but many of their stories looked at one particular aspect of the war. So I took extracts from a range of interesting stories to make one character like the entertainer. I also had to reach a point when I forgot the book in order to let my own imaginings piece the stories together. All this was done with great love and respect so, even though we're looking at one character, like one nurse or one entertainer; in fact they represent 20 women. I think Siobhan's put the book together beautifully, but it is largely a documentary.

Now that you are in rehearsal, are there any stories you wish you had included from the book?

We're in the second week and I'm still restructuring, rewriting and discovering things. I'm going home tonight to put in new things. The cast is very creative and familiar with the way I work, so we are all still discovering more.

I know that I want the show to have no interval and I want it to be around 100 minutes long, so that is dictating how I shape things. Some of the stuff that I had originally put in, I feel is just reportage and not interesting. So I have

restructured the play so that the stories of these women interweave and have this sort of connection through time and space.

Can you discuss the challenges of being the adapter (playwright) and director?

Well, I only have myself to blame if the scripts not there on time. More than 50% of my career has been creating shows, so I'm used to that and I love it when the subject matter's great. I've worked on a lot of pop music theatre and in circus and physical theatre, where you have to create the stories. *Minefields and Miniskirts* is so wonderful because the characters are so fantastic, the story is a great adventure and the five actors are amazing personalities; they're very strong and individual women. These women have continued to survive in the arts with a determination to reinvent their careers. I had always imagined strong women playing these roles, women with many layers and textures and an emotional heart.

When I'm working with a cast like this, it's very easy for me. I never get up and act the roles for people, I listen to ideas and suggestions that help the performance take shape. We're really lucky to be here at Playbox because we're working in very good conditions. Often I work in freezing cold warehouses, under quite poor conditions, so this to me, to all of us, is luxury. Plus we have a great Stage Manager, so all of that only brings strength to me.

Are there any particular themes you wanted to highlight in bringing these stories to life?

You would have to be blind not to see parallels with how the world is today. There are so many examples of conflict in the world and not just in Iraq. I suppose the piece has a sense of nostalgia about it, because it's set in a particular time and place, but we're trying hard to avoid sentiment. I love the adventure captured in these stories, of these really young women aged from 16 to 23 going to war. Especially as this happened at a time when many people hadn't even travelled outside of Australia, let alone to Asia.

I've just been over to Vietnam for a week with Robyn Arthur, one of the cast, and Cat Raven the designer, which has affected the show so much. I think the trip really affected us tremendously, and clarified what we're trying to do with the production.

When you're adapting a script, do you have a sense of how the staging is going to look and the overall design?

Yes I do. I've worked very closely with Cat and I have been working on this for months, so it's gone through quite a few permutations.

The show's very prop bound with fancy umbrellas, zippo lighters, teacups and all that sort of stuff. Cat is being fantastically fluid, so we are allowed to say, 'Oh we want four of those now instead of two', and she does it. It is the same approach with the creation of the music and choreography.

How would you describe the overall style of the play?

It's a mixture. It is not a musical, but it is a mixture of physical stylised theatre, that depicts a sense of truth and reality. The play starts with these five women

meeting at a march, then time and place transcends and they are in this temple/bar across from a paddy field and they are dressed in Asian clothing. It is a mixture of music, movement and text. I would say it is not a play, it is a *show* because that's the way I think of it.

A lot of this company, Debra Byrne, Robyn Arthur and Wendy Stapleton in particular, have a very strong history in music theatre and even though this is not a musical, they sort of understand a sense of *heightened realism*. It is also exciting to have a comedian, Tracy Bartram, who's not necessarily playing the funny role in the show, and Tracy Mann who is an inordinately brilliant actress.

When you have a stable of great cabaret artists and singers that's a good example of the fusion of the show, because they are in themselves disparate personalities that have to come together as a team.

Do you use song and music as a device to create atmosphere and establish a particular time and place in the show?

One of the things I wanted to do was to have singers in the show and every producer including those at Playbox have always said is it going to have songs of the period. I feel that is a connecting device for the audience. I then decided on female singer/songwriters and started doing a bit of research into songs and I tried to find things that fitted into the show.

I tried to find obscure songs like *Saigon Bride* by Joan Baez, which I had never heard of before and it totally relates to the end of the show when they're leaving Saigon. I guess the songs and music are evocative of the period and because women wrote them they largely express the sentiments and ideas of women at that time. The cast sing *Circle Game* by Joni Mitchell at the end of the play, which definitely reflects a time of war and peace rallies. Even though it's actually not about war, but it somehow seems like it is. The songs feel like they were written for the show.

Can you discuss the importance of the actor / audience relationship in this production?

The show is directed at the audience from the beginning. I mean it's not that the actors aren't acting with each other, but they acknowledge there are people watching it, which is a device I quite like. It is interesting as I am starting to do a series of things about real stories, real subjects and no matter how stylised it is, the identification for the audience is important. *Certified Male* is actually a beautifully written show by Scott Rankin and Glynn Nicholas, but a lot of people who haven't seen it, think it's some sort of men's comedy show. In fact it's got much more meaning than that. It is a show that literally provokes incredible discussion and in fact there are many examples of life changing incidents that have happened through that show.

I hope *Minefields and Miniskirts* will be inspiring for young people, especially young women in this way. I hope it will give people something to think about. I love presenting a show that's full of incredible emotion and extremely difficult subject matter. Even though the actors talk directly to the audience, I think they will understand and relate to that subject matter. So you don't have to be fifty years old and you don't have to even know anything about the Vietnam War to get the real heart of it.

What do you see as the role of theatre in contemporary Australian society?

The theatre is able to offer stories in a different sort of way. I think everyone is looking for stories. For example if we take this play, even though people now say it's a wonderful idea, a very populist idea, in actual fact hardly anyone knew women even went to the war besides nurses, they had no idea. So I'm looking for stories that are going to illuminate people. I think theatre is a wonderful medium where you can sit in the theatre and say, 'Yes, that's me!' or 'Yes, that's my father!' or 'Yes, that's my lover or my husband or whatever', and that's the very best.

I feel that theatre is largely a middle class pursuit and I love it when you can actually get out and tour to as many people as possible around the country. That's what I want from this show, to play everything from one-night stands in country towns to four weeks at the Opera House. That's the bridge I want to get over because largely I think going to the theatre is quite expensive. I want to feel like it's for everyone, which is such a hard thing to do.

How do you feel about the play being studied by VCE Theatre Studies students?

Great, because you know it can be a fantastic thing. It's funny, often actors will say, 'Oh God, there's a group of students coming!' but we all know when you're doing a fine show, an honest and powerful show, a student audience can be the most thrilling audience you ever have. So it's like walking a tightrope at the circus. You've got to be good, the minute they smell weakness or lies they're on to you. What a younger audience might have trouble wrapping their heads around is the sheer innocence of these young women, because that's really what the story is about, they literally go for the adventure. The plays got many parallels for everyone, but they go on this adventure having no idea of the consequences. Today we know what the world looks like, because we see wars on television, and most of us have at least been to Bali or had Asian experience. These women from the suburbs of Australia in the 60s and 70s, walk into a war zone, it's hard to remember what that innocence was like. I have to keep saying to the actors all the time, let us remind ourselves how amazing this is. I think a younger audience might identify with the spirit and humour of the characters.

Interview with designer for Minefields & Miniskirts, Catherine Raven

Cat, as a designer, what was your initial response to the concept of Minefields and Miniskirts?

After reading the book, I began looking at a lot of photographic material, videos and documentaries of the Vietnam War. I found the stories to be documentary in style and initially felt that the theatricality of the stories would be supported with lots of visual material. Initially I was unsure whether Terence wanted to create a fictional world or a real world for the characters. During the script development process, Terence and I would discuss ideas and we ended up moving from the idea of presenting the real world, into a concept of presenting a fantasy landscape.

When Terence approached you to design Minefields and Miniskirts, did he have set ideas of how he wanted the production to look?

We started the project at the same level. We had both read the book, but there was no script. We both loved the idea of the project and had a deep emotional connection to the stories. It was a very collaborative experience.

It is such a joy to be so involved in the creation of a work, instead of working with a director who says here's a script respond to it. I'd approach Terence with an idea that would effectively alter the script; it was a really unique design process.

What are some of the specific design choices you have made in collaboration with Terence?

Our initial concept was to use multimedia - photographic and video style material as back projection to create a landscape to the stories being told. We then decided that, since Playbox offered such an exciting theatrical space, we wanted to take it further theatrically. Terence had choreographed many wonderful productions and felt that he wanted to tell the stories in a more chorus like fashion, referencing Greek tragedy and the like. So, I remember turning up at Terence's house with this idea and feeling really nervous about it and suggesting that we could create a fantasy space - a space that is in their heads, a story telling world, not a real place. We're not in Saigon we're in a memory landscape and the memories of Saigon are so rich for the characters. Despite all the trauma and the drama that happened there, they have a very deep emotional and spiritual connection with the place and I really wanted to reference that symbolically. Each character's story has a unique way of looking at Vietnam, so we didn't want too many strong statements, but I wanted to evoke an atmosphere, a story telling world.

How did your trip to Vietnam influence the ultimate style of the piece?

Oh it was amazing going to Vietnam, what an opportunity. I had established a pretty solid design concept by the time I went with the costume and set, but going to Vietnam reinforced the ideas that I had taken from my pictorial research.

In the production I've created a space that doesn't realistically represent Saigon, but offers the flavours and emotions of the world. I was lucky enough to have bought all the Vietnamese silks for the show from there. I had a full costume made and bought reference patterns for the *doyenne*, which is the traditional Vietnamese dress. I also bought a number of authentic props like Zippo lighters that they had in the War and those funny helicopters made out of Coke cans and the coolie hats, it was amazing. I bought the coolie hats from an old woman who was in the South Vietnamese war and she was telling me all about it and how much she loved the Australians, and that the Australians taught her English. Oh, and all the lanterns. They came from a funny little shop and were all hand made especially for the show.

How does your design help to establish the time and place in which the stories are set?

I didn't want to create a naturalistic representation of a time and place. I think it's really important to focus on the stories and that's why I wanted to keep the set quite simple, so that the focus is on the actor and the storytelling. I think the set has a tactile quality to it but it's essentially about creating an atmosphere.

At the beginning of the performance there is a physical curtain, a cloth. Tracy enters and speaks in front of it. As the curtain is opened, a bamboo blind is revealed and as this is opened we are introduced into our story telling world, with an epic landscape. Hopefully the beauty of the landscape will reflect the irony with which these stories depict the horror and destruction of war.

We stay in that world as the stories are told until the end, when we return to 'real world' - the real space of the here and now. Vietnam is a beautiful place and the war was devastating to the environment and people. I think the play is, in a way, celebrating Vietnam. It does create an awareness of the horror of war, but it is a celebration.

Are there any themes that you wanted to highlight in the design, which you felt were really important to the story telling?

I think it's important to highlight the spiritual connection that these women have with Vietnam. They talk about going to Vietnam as one person and returning as another. I think these stories are not necessarily about war, but about people. There is one story about a Vietnam Veteran's wife not actually being in Vietnam, but still having a personal connection with it.

Can you discuss your overall approach to designing the set.

I have tried to leave the space open and not create too many barriers. Terence has developed the script to a point where he feels comfortable the cast can take it run with it, and have the opportunity to create.

In creating the set, there weren't any necessary items that needed to be put in the space, which was really liberating for a designer. For example; I didn't need a door there, or a table there. We could actually do the whole play in a black box. It is an amazing design opportunity to work so closely with the playwright/director who encourages you to take ideas and run away with them. I had a really good time!

VIETNAM - A CONTEMPORARY AND HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Vietnam

Most visitors to Vietnam are overwhelmed by the sublime beauty of the country's natural setting: the Red River Delta in the north, the Mekong Delta in the south and almost the entire coastal strip are a patchwork of brilliant green rice paddies tended by women in conical hats.

There are some divine beaches along the coast, while inland there are soaring mountains, some of which are cloaked by dense, misty forests. Vietnam also offers an opportunity to see a country of traditional charm and rare beauty rapidly opening up to the outside world.

Despite its ongoing economic liberalisation and the pressures of rapid development, this dignified country has managed to preserve its rich civilisation and highly cultured society.

It has discarded its post-war fatigues and the boom in budget travelling, coupled with the softening of government control, have enabled more contemporary and relevant portraits of the country to gain currency in the West.

Full country name: Socialist Republic of Vietnam

Area: 329,566 sq km

Population: 81.62 million

Capital City: Hanoi (pop 3.5 million)

People: 84% ethnic Vietnamese, 2% ethnic Chinese, also Khmers, Chams (a remnant of the once-great Indianised Champa Kingdom) and members of over 50 ethnolinguistic groups (also known as Montagnards, 'highlanders' in French)

Language: Vietnamese, Russian, French, Chinese, English

Religion: Buddhism is the principal religion but there are also sizeable Taoist, Confucian, Hoa Hao, Caodaists, Muslim and Christian minorities

Government: Communist state

Head of State: President Tran Duc Luong

Head of Government: Prime Minister Phan Van Khai

GDP: US\$24 billion

GDP per capita: US\$300

Annual Growth: 8%

Inflation: 8%

Major Industries: Rice, rubber, food processing, sugar, textiles, chemicals

Major Trading Partners: China, Singapore, South Korea, Japan, Taiwan

Culture

Four great philosophies and religions have shaped the spiritual life of the Vietnamese people: Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism and Christianity. Over the centuries, Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism have melded with popular Chinese beliefs and ancient Vietnamese animism to form what is known as *Tam Giao* (or 'Triple Religion').

Vietnamese (*kinh*) is the official language of the country, although there are dialectic differences across Vietnam. There are dozens of different languages spoken by various ethnic minorities and Khmer and Loatian are spoken in some parts. The most widely spoken foreign languages in Vietnam are Chinese (Cantonese and Mandarin), English, French and Russian, more or less in that order.

Popular artistic forms include: traditional painting produced on frame-mounted silk; an eclectic array of theatre, puppetry, music and dance; religious sculpture; lacquerware and ceramics.

Vietnamese cuisine is especially varied - there are said to be nearly 500 different traditional dishes that include exotic meats (but think twice before you eat a rare animal) and fantastic vegetarian creations (often prepared to replicate meat and fish dishes). However, the staple of Vietnamese cuisine is plain white rice dressed up with a plethora of vegetables, fish (which is common in Vietnam), meat, spices and sauces. Spring rolls, noodles and steamed rice dumplings are popular snacks, and the ubiquitous soups include eel and vermicelli, shredded chicken and bitter soups. Fruit is abundant; some of the more unusual ones include green dragon fruit, jujube, khaki, longan, mangosteen, pomelo, three-seed cherry and water apple. Vietnamese coffee (*ca phephin*) is very good; it's usually served very strong and very sweet.

HISTORY

The sophisticated Bronze Age Dong Son culture emerged around the 3rd century BC. From the 1st to the 6th centuries AD, the south of what is now Vietnam was part of the Indianised kingdom of Funan, which produced fine art and architecture. The Hindu kingdom of Champa appeared around present-day Danang in the late 2nd century and had spread south to what is now Nha Trang by the 8th century. The kingdom existed in part through conducting raids in the region. The Chinese conquered the Red River Delta in the 2nd century and their 1000-year rule, marked by tenacious Vietnamese resistance and repeated rebellions, ended in AD 938 when Ngo Quyen vanquished the Chinese armies at the Bach Dang River.

During the next few centuries, Vietnam repulsed repeated invasions by China, and expanded its borders southwards from the Red River Delta, populating much of the Mekong Delta. In 1858, French and Spanish-led forces stormed Danang after several missionaries had been killed. A year later, Saigon was seized. By 1867, France had conquered all of southern Vietnam, which became the French colony of Cochinchina.

Communist guerillas under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh resisted French domination during and after WWII. Ho Chi Minh's declaration of Vietnamese independence in 1945 sparked violent confrontations with the French, culminating in the French military defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954.

The Geneva Accords of 1954 temporarily divided Vietnam into two zones (the Communist north and the anti-Communist, US-supported south). Political and ideological opposition quickly turned to armed struggle, prompting the USA and other countries to commit combat troops in 1965. The Paris Peace Agreements, signed in 1973, provided an immediate cease-fire and signalled the withdrawal of US troops. Saigon eventually capitulated to the Communist forces on 30 April 1975.

Going straight from the fat into the frying pan, Vietnam had barely drawn

breath from its war with America when it found itself at loggerheads with Khmer Rouge forces along the Cambodian borders. A protracted round of fighting eventually saw China enter the fray in support of Cambodia and the killings continued until the UN brokered a deal, with Vietnamese forces being pulled out of Cambodia in 1989. Although the Khmer Rouge continued to snipe from the borders, it was the first time since WWII that Vietnam was not officially at war with any other nation. The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the USSR in 1991 caused Vietnam and Western nations to seek rapprochement.

In July 1995 even the intransigent USA re-established diplomatic relations with Hanoi, although Hanoi initially refused to sign trade agreements with the US in 1999 (this was finalised the following year). The US, on their part, talked about normalising relations but over 25 years later there's still a lot of soul-searching, hand-wringing and post mortems going on, accompanied by a slather of angst-ridden films and a handful of unplugged guitar tunes. John McCain, on a visit to Hanoi, talked about 'the wrong guys winning the war'. Vietnam went through something of a postwar economic boom, before suffering the economic setbacks that plagued the entire region when the foreign investment bubble burst in the late 1990s. It has recently recovered part of this ground with some pundits predicting it will be the next Asian 'tiger' economy.

SOURCE: www.lonelyplanet.com/destinations/south_east_asia

poster study:

anti-conscription and anti-war posters

SENDING AUSTRALIANS TO A FOREIGN WAR has always provoked public debate. The conflict in Vietnam was no exception. While many Australians supported the need for 'forward defence' and were keen to demonstrate that we would fight beside our Asian and US allies, others opposed Australia's involvement in the war. A major issue for those opposing the war was selective conscription by ballot. They considered it unfair that some should be compelled to go and others not. Another issue was that 20-year-olds did not have the vote at that stage.

By the late 1960s those who actively opposed the war and conscription began to outnumber those who actively supported Australia's continuing involvement. One of the methods used by those opposing the war to inform and persuade their fellow Australians was the use of anti-war and anti-conscription posters like those in the exhibition.

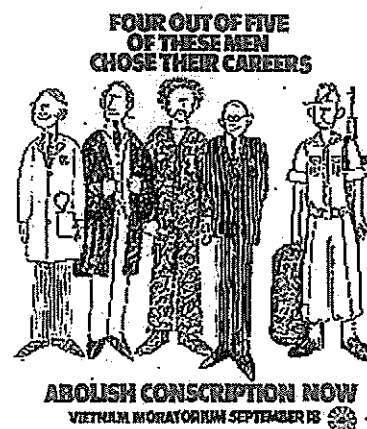
Examine the anti-conscription poster then read the summary of how conscription worked in Australia during the Vietnam War to answer the questions overleaf.

A summary of how conscription for national service worked in Australia from 1964 to 1973

- Conscription is compulsory service in the armed forces.
- In November 1964 the Australian government introduced selective conscription under the National Service Act.
- All twenty-year-old Australian males were required to register for national service.
- Only a limited number were needed, so a ballot system was created for selecting who should serve and who should not.
- The ballot consisted of drawing a predetermined number of marbles out of a barrel. The marbles were marked with a birth date. If your birth date was drawn you would be notified and directed to report for a medical examination with a view to being 'called up' into the Australian Army. If your birth date was not drawn you were notified that your national service commitment had been indefinitely deferred.
- A barrel draw occurred every six months, and the number of marbles drawn varied in each ballot. On average an Australian male stood a one in ten or one in twelve chance of having his birthday selected.
- University students could apply to have their national service deferred until they had completed their studies.
- The period of national service was two years. Unlike earlier periods of conscription there were no restrictions on sending national servicemen to fight overseas. They could be, and were, sent to fight in Vietnam.

artist unknown

Four out of five of these men chose their careers 1970
lithograph in red and black, 50.6 x 38 cm
AWM (V866)



THE AUSTRALIAN TASK FORCE that served in South Vietnam included both regular troops and conscripted national servicemen. Over 18,000 of the 64,000 Australians selected for national service between 1965 and 1971 were sent to Vietnam. Their level of professionalism was as high as that of the regular soldiers, despite the controversy about their deployment to the war. You cannot tell from the photographs the difference between the two. Some national servicemen became officers and led men in battle (including Trevor Lyons, the creator of one of the works of art on display). Many volunteered for national service in Vietnam even though they had not been selected in the ballots.

In Australia public opinion began to change from support for national service to opposition to it. Selective conscription came to be seen as one of the great injustices of Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War. Study the anti-conscription poster and read the summary of how conscription worked in Australia during the Vietnam War to answer the following questions.

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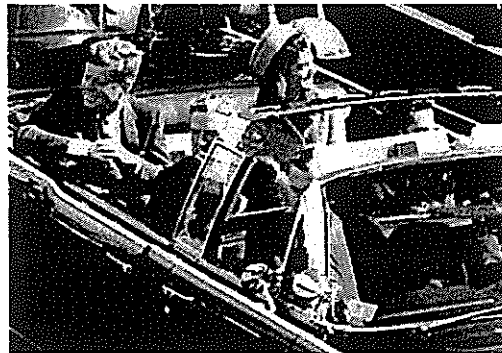
School Archives

THE WORLD

The 60s were a decade of dramatic technological and social change. Internationally, we witnessed the Soviet Union and the USA take the Cold War into space where man finally walked on the moon; while back on Earth the contraceptive pill and amplified music fuelled revolutions between generations and between men and women. Although this proved to be a decade of student revolutions and "flower power", Cold War conflicts intensified: the Berlin Wall was built, the USA went into Vietnam, there was conflict in the Middle East, the world was taken to the brink of nuclear war over the Cuban missile crisis and Soviet tanks crushed the democratic movement in Czechoslovakia in the Prague Spring of 1968. We also witnessed on TV in our lounge rooms the tragic assassinations of President John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King and Senator Robert Kennedy.



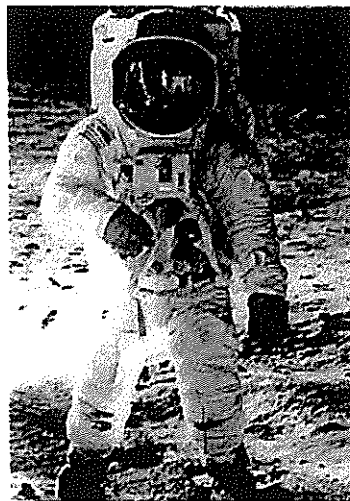
Erection of the Berlin Wall



President Kennedy arrives in Dallas



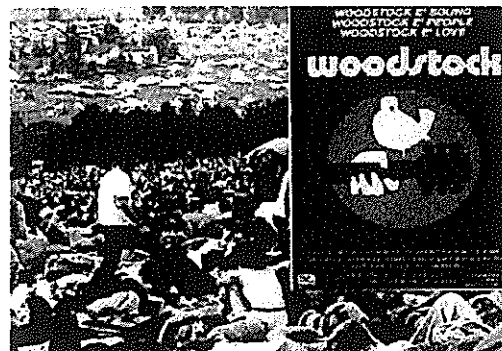
Elvis Presley is "king"



Man walking on the Moon



Martin Luther King in Washington

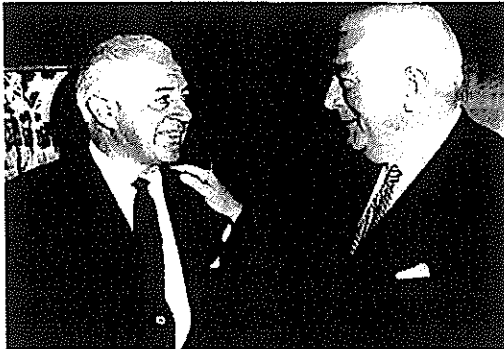


Woodstock Music Festival



AUSTRALIA

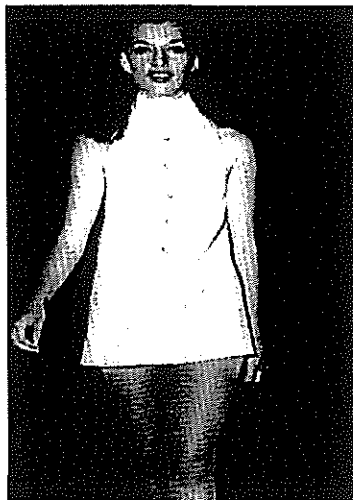
The 60s in Australia saw great change and excitement. Discoveries of massive mineral deposits made prosperity seem permanent. Cities rapidly increased in size and, despite controversy over the design, steady progress was made on the construction of the Sydney Opera House. The White Australia immigration policy was dismantled, and the government began to introduce social reforms for Aborigines and working women. Although affluence freed youth to indulge in the pleasures of the "surfie" cult - and in the avalanche of fashions, films and music - fear of the spread of communism (the "Dominoe theory") also spurred the Australian government to introduce conscription and go "All the way with LBJ" into the Vietnam War.



Harold Holt becomes Prime Minister



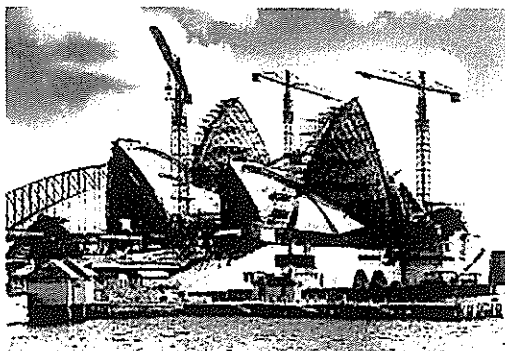
Beatlemania hits Australia



Mini Skirts raise eyebrows



Conscripts sent to Vietnam



Sydney Opera House takes shape



Charles Perkins and the Freedom Bus

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Content and Themes

1. The play is based on *Australian* stories.
 - Why and how is this important to us? How may this affect our responses?
2. The director, Terence O'Connell, says of the play, '*I love presenting a show that's full of incredible emotion and extremely difficult subject matter*'.
 - Outline the emotional journey that *Minefields & Miniskirts* takes you on
 - Did you find the subject matter *difficult*? Explain
3. Terence O'Connell uses the terms '*conflict*', '*nostalgia*', '*sentiment*' and '*adventure*' when he is talking about highlighting particular themes in the play:
 - How are each of these aspects explored in the play?
4. The director says, '*You would have to be blind not to see parallels with how the world is today*':
 - What parallels do you see with the Vietnam War and current world events?
 - Is *Minefields and Miniskirts* an anti-war play?
5. Debra Byrne talks about her memories of the Vietnam War as it being '*a sexy war...there was lots of sexy, groovy music attached to it and guys, GIs and gorgeous girls*', and that Vietnam was an '*exotic place with exotic colours*'.
 - What aspects of the play do you feel illustrate these points?
 - Can war be '*sexy*'?
6. What other themes do you think are explored in *Minefields & Miniskirts*?

Style & Language

1. Siobhan McHugh says to the director, Terence O'Connell, that the book '*is not a piece of theatre*'. The director says of some of the stories that they are '*just reportage and not interesting*'.
 - What do you think makes an effective piece of theatre?
 - Do you think that the way language is used in the play reflects the language of a book or has it been made *theatrical*?
2. The director, Terence O'Connell, describes the style of the play in several ways - '*physical stylised theatre*', '*not a play, it is a show*', '*fusion*' and '*heightened realism*'.
 - What is your understanding of each of these terms?
 - How would *you* describe the overall style of the play?
3. Director, Terence O'Connell describes the structure of the play as follows: '*The stories of these women interweave and have this sort of connection through time and space*'.
 - How are *time* and *space* conveyed in the play?
 - In what ways do the stories of each of the characters interweave in terms of the use of *language* and through the use of *theatrical conventions*?
4. Robyn Arthur says: '*...the style of this play is not dialogue in a play, responding to scenes set up like a structure of a play...It isn't like that at all*'.
 - What impact do you think the adaptation process may have had on the actors' process?

5. *Minefields & Miniskirts* is a very character driven play.
 - Within that, does the play have a narrative structure? Is it linear? Is it abstract?
 - How does it differ from other pieces of theatre you have seen?
6. Wendy Stapleton says of the songs and music:

'The songs are taken from that particular era and they are songs that definitely reflect Vietnam...it will very much put them in that time...lyrically they reflect what we are intending as well.'

 - Discuss in detail the role and function of the music and songs in the play considering - structure, story and character and themes.

Dramaturgy & Direction

1. The director cast *Minefields & Miniskirts* himself choosing women he had worked with before. He describes them as:

... 'strong and individual women...women with many layers and textures and an emotional heart'

 - In what ways do you think this could have enhanced the directing process?
 - What challenges could it have offered up to both the director and the actors?
 - How important do you think casting is in producing a play?
 - Could you see other actors playing these roles?
2. In referring to his directorial process, Terence O'Connell says, *'I never get up and act the roles for people; I listen to ideas and suggestions that help the performance take shape'*.
 - In what ways do you think this particular collaborative approach is reflected in the play?
 - What do you see as being the role of a director?
3. *Minefields & Miniskirts* is based on historical events and personal story.
 - What type of *dramaturgical* process do you think may have been undertaken in order to create the play?
 - What is your understanding of the role of a *dramaturg*?

[See Further Activities in these notes]

Acting and Actor/Audience Relationship

1. The actors responded quite strongly to the concept of the play. In particular Robyn Arthur, who plays the aid worker, says:

'I was really excited about the opportunity for all of us to tell the story of this really strong part of our culture'

 and Tracy Mann, who plays Margaret, says:

'It has something to say about society and war and humanity'.

 - Do you think it is important for an actor to be able to strongly connect with the material in order to create their character? Explain your answer.
2. Tracy Bartram says that to play her role in the play, *'is a responsibility, an honour, even a privilege'*
 - What do you think she means by this?
3. Each of the characters in *Minefields & Miniskirts* is an amalgam of several real people. Robyn Arthur says of this:

'Therefore, in a sense you have to make that character live for you in the particular world you are in'.

 - What do you think she means by this?
 - How would you relate this statement to your own monologue development process?

4. Carefully read over how the processes the actors used to help 'find' their characters - defining, questioning text etc.
 - List these and discuss how useful they may be for you in developing your own monologue characters
 - In what ways do you think these processes may help establish truth and belief?
5. Tracy Mann talks about '*...there are some speeches that I just can't learn yet*'.
 - What do you think she means by this?
 - Is acting a matter of *feeling*?
6. The director talks about the actor/audience relationship as follows: '*The show is directed at the audience from the beginning. I mean it's not that the actors aren't acting with each other, but they acknowledge there are people watching it, which is a device I quite like*'.
 - How would you describe the actor/audience relationship in *Minefields & Miniskirts*?
7. Terence O'Connell describes the songs and music as a '*connecting device for the audience*'.
 - What do you think he means by this?

Design and Stagecraft

1. The designer, Cat Raven, and the director wanted to create the world of the play as a '*fantasy landscape*'.
 - What were your initial responses to the set?
 - What aspects of the design would you describe as fantasy?
 - What aspects of the design would you say were real?
 - Would this play have worked on a totally realistic set? Explain your answers.
2. Cat Raven uses terms to describe her set such as: '*a story-telling world*', '*symbolic*', '*a memory landscape*', '*an epic landscape*'.
 - How are these terms evoked in the design and realisation of the play?
3. '*I wanted to keep the set quite simple, so that the focus is on the actor and the storytelling*'
 - Discuss ways in which the design of the play serves the actors.
4. Cat Raven was keen to let her design demonstrate a '*spiritual connection*' between the characters and Vietnam.
 - How is this idea conveyed through the design and stagecraft elements?
5. Refer to the costume designs at the back of the notes
 - How do the designs allow the past and present to merge?
 - What aspects of the costumes reflect the two cultures represented in the play?
 - In what ways do the designs reflect your understanding of each of the characters?

And further...

1. The actors talk about the power of theatre to '*change people's lives*'.
 - What aspects of *Minefields & Miniskirts* resonate for you?
 - Discuss the power of theatre to tell stories.
2. Terence O'Connell says, '*The theatre is able to offer stories in a different sort of way...I think theatre is a wonderful medium where you can sit in the theatre and say, 'Yes, that's me!'*'
 - Who or what did you identify with in the play?

ACTIVITIES

In your study of the actors in *Minefields & Miniskirts* you may wish to explore or engage in the following activities:

1. Prepare a profile for each of the characters whereby you list:
 - each character's status within the play
 - what each character's journey is within the story of the play
 - what is motivating each character and whether this changes throughout their journey
 - particular physical characteristics each character has and how these were demonstrated through the use of expressive skills

2. The designer, Cat Raven, states that the play could be performed in a black box type theatre space. Your brief as the Tour Designer is to take a more compact version of the design on the road with you. Considering the design carefully:
 - What essential elements would you retain as being crucial to the play? In your response discuss: set elements, props, costume, music and sound
 - Justify each of your choices.

3. Refer to the costume designs at the back of the notes. Take on the role of costume designer and:
 - Enlarge the images and then render them with fabric, collage or paint
 - Create a colour palette in paint or pastels for each of the costumes that reflects your concept of the play
 - Select fabrics for each costume that you, as the designer, would use to construct the costume and 'swatch' the design (attach the various samples and label them)

4. Research one or all of the following:
 - Songs and music of the 1960s and 1970s in Australia and America
 - The anti-war movement
 - Parallel political events such as the Women's Movement
 - Conscriptation in wartime

In what ways does having knowledge of a particular period enhance your understanding or enjoyment of a play?

5. Dramaturgy
Traditionally the role of a dramaturg is divided into three areas - production dramaturgy, script dramaturgy and literary management.
 - Look up dramaturgy at www.dramaturgy.net/dramaturgy/what/Description.html
 - Create a dramaturgical overview for the play based on your reading of the script, seeing the performance and your research about the role of dramaturgs eg. what do you think the dramaturgical process for this play has been?

Further Resources

1. 'Minefields & Miniskirts', book by Siobhan McHugh

Published 1993 by Doubleday Books, this is the book on which the play is based tracking the stories of Australian women in Vietnam.

Up to a thousand Australian women were in wartime Vietnam during the sixties and early seventies - as entertainers, army and civilian nurses, secretaries, consular staff and more. They were feted and pampered, patronised and harassed, and a few were assaulted. The wives, mothers and lovers of the men who returned were to discover how harrowing the effect of war could be, and how it would affect their lives... Though their backgrounds varied as much as their experiences, they have this in common: Vietnam transformed their lives

[Minefields & Miniskirts by Siobhan McHugh]

2. Australia in the 1960s and 1970s

www.abc.net.au/archives/timeline/1960s.htm

www.abc.net.au/archives/timeline/1970s.htm

Gives an overview of significant political, cultural and social history in Australia over these two decades. Useful for placing the Vietnam conflict in a context

3. Women at War

www.angellpro.com.au/women.htm

A website that comprises a page called 'Brave Women'. Dedicated to the women who went to war in the South Pacific area.

Women at war and serving for peace in Oceania have remained largely undocumented in history and nursing history. This page sets out to redress the balance and provides links to women's history and their works.

4. The Australian War Memorial

www.awm.gov.au

This is a terrific site! Surf it well and you will gain a good overview of *Australia's* perspective on the Vietnam War.

5. Films and Television Series

See if you can get hold of any of the following which give particular perspectives on the Vietnam conflict:

Television:

Vietnam - Australian TV Drama series

Australians at War - ABC TV documentary series

Tour of Duty - US Television Drama series

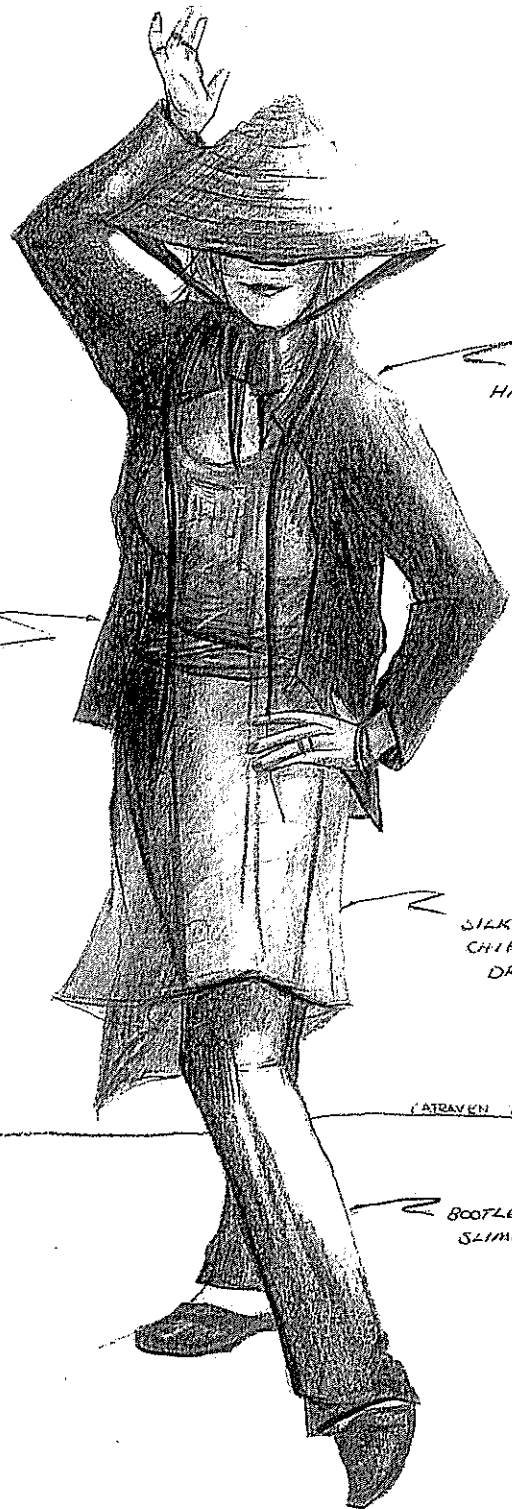
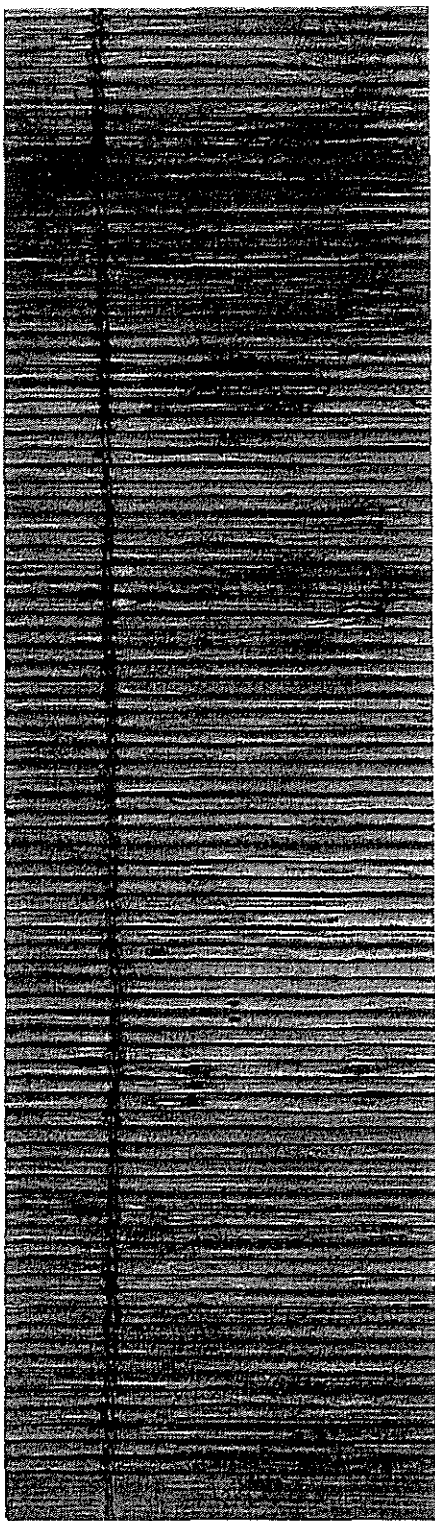
Film:

Apocalypse Now

Born on the Fourth of July

Platoon

The Quiet American- American Films about Vietnam



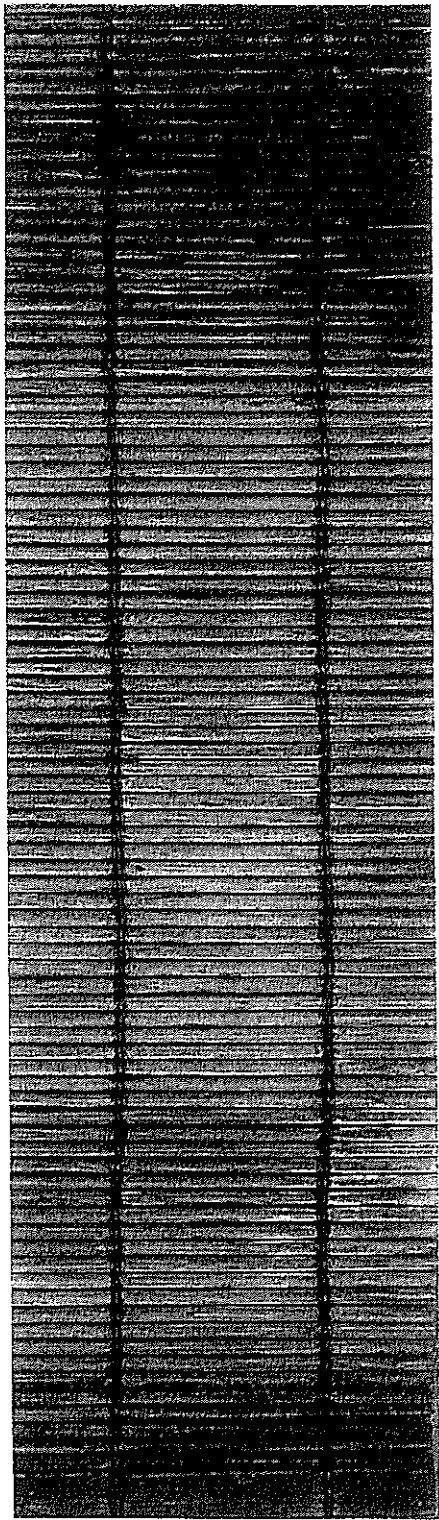
HAND KNITTED
SILK
CARRIGAN
W/ COORDINATE
RIBBON

TONE ON TONE
APPLIQUE
DETAIL
W/ BEADING

SILK
CHIFFON
DRESS

TRAVEL 04

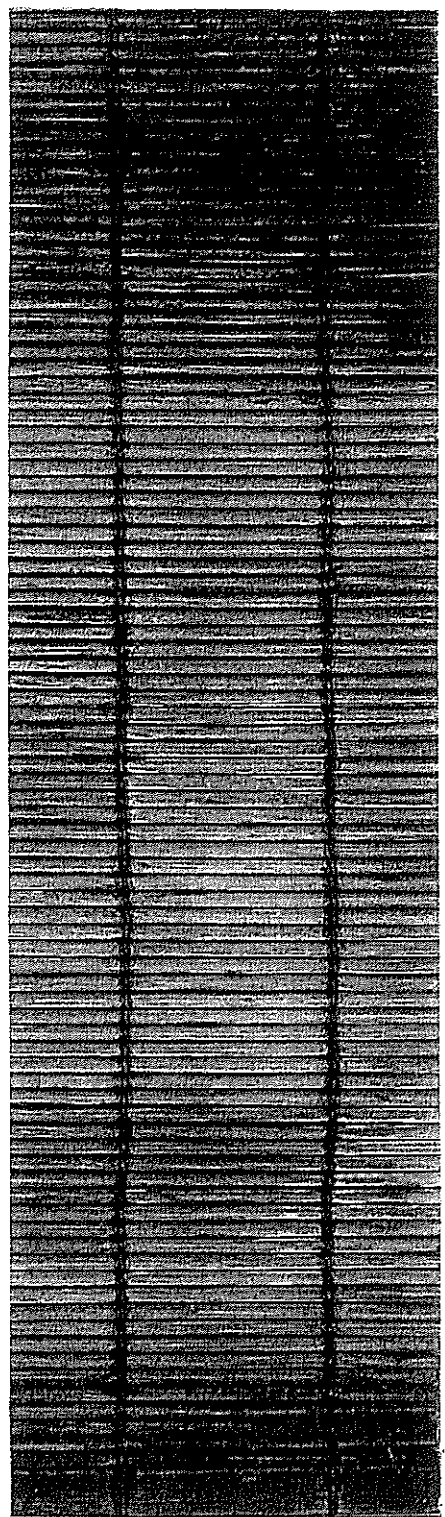
BOOTLES
SLIMLINE PANTS



HEAD
SCARF

SILK JACKET
W/ EMBROIDERY
AND APPLIQUE
DETAIL

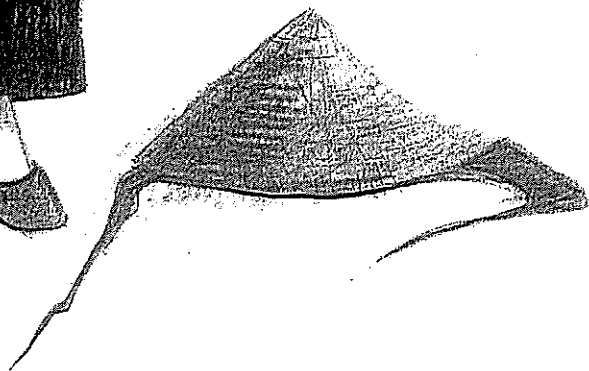
CADAVEN '08

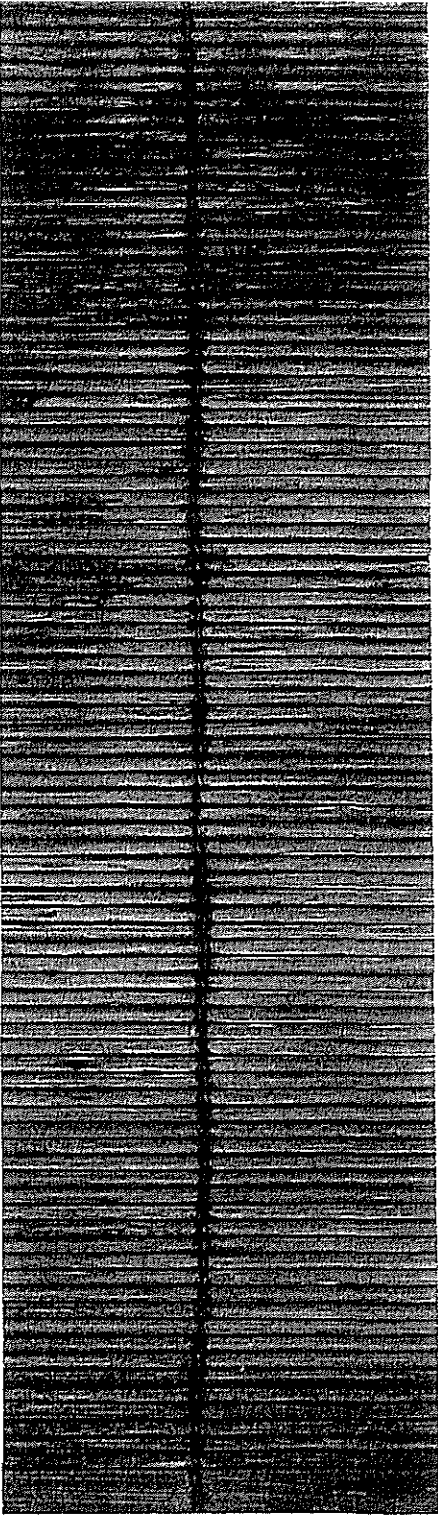


SILK SHIRT
W/ CRUSH TEXTURE
AND EMBROIDERY
DETAIL

FISHERMAN'S
CULOTTES

CATSVAEN DT

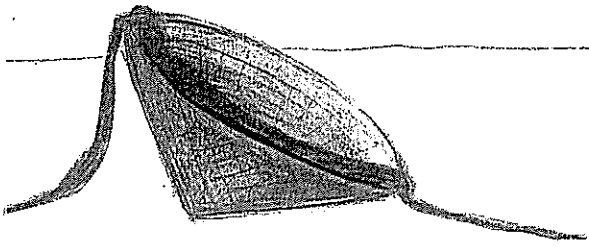


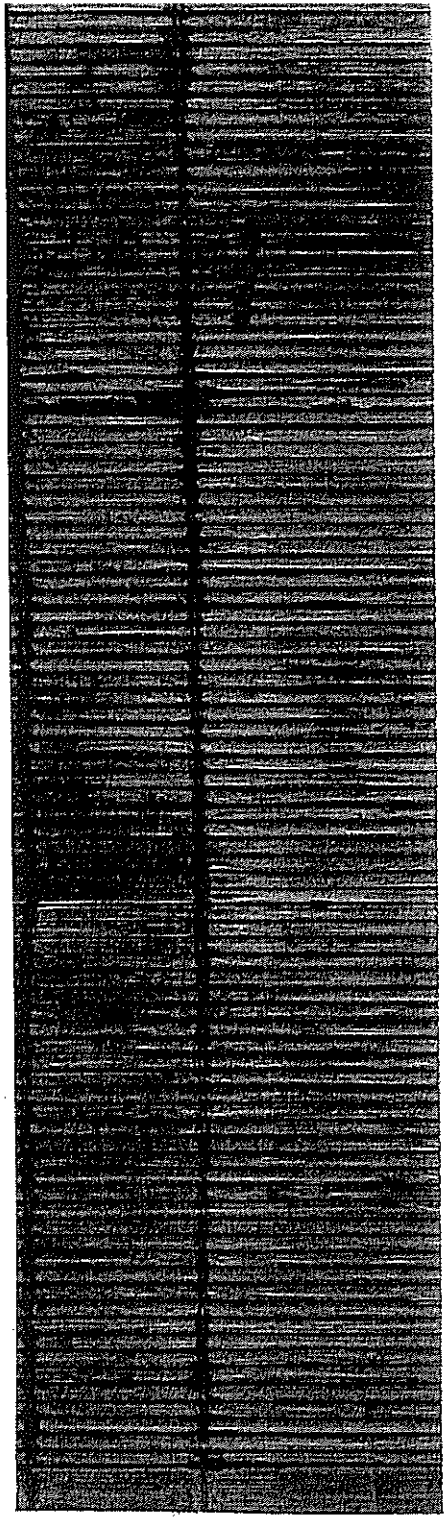


ASYMMETRICAL
CROSS OVER
JACKET / LIGHT
WEIGHT
QUILTING
w/ BANKSIA
EMBROIDERY

SILK TROUSERS

CATRAVEN '04





SILK
COAT DRESS
W/ SPLICED
THROUGH SIDES
of FRONT

SILK ORGANZA
APPLIQUE
DETAIL



FAERMENI GA