

**MALTHOUSE  
PROMPT**

# **MRS PETROV'S SHOE**



NOËLLE JANACZEWSKA

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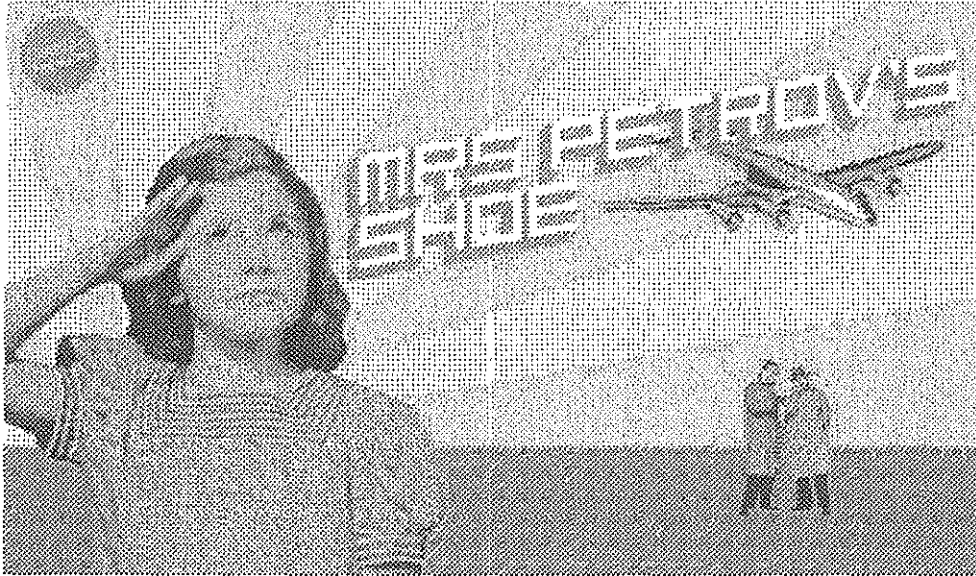
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Theatre @ Risk presents

# MRS PETROV'S SHOE

By Noëlle Janaczewska



## Education Kit

Prepared by Theatre @ Risk  
March 2006

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These notes are designed to aide students in understanding and analysing the performance, design elements, script structure and direction. The notes provide information about the performance and suggest further areas of study. The notes are designed as a guide only and hopefully will be used as a jumping off point for further study and discussion in the classroom.

**For more information about Theatre @ Risk please visit  
[www.theatreatrisk.com](http://www.theatreatrisk.com)**

If you would like to be kept up to date with Theatre @ Risk news and performances please join our mailing list by sending a quick email to: [mail@theatreatrisk.com](mailto:mail@theatreatrisk.com)

## ABOUT THEATRE@RISK

Theatre @ Risk is for the theatrical explorer and adventurer. Let your senses experience the new and unexpected. This is theatre for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Theatre @ Risk has been creating a diverse range of innovative new performance works since 2001, presenting the latest cutting edge local and international theatrical texts. Our focus is on work that is brave and inventive, that challenges our audiences' expectations, that is dynamic and entertaining whilst being actively engaged in social and political debate.

Theatre @ Risk has proven its key role in the Melbourne arts scene over the past five years, as a principal developer and creator of new work. Its work has been repeatedly acclaimed for its strong production values, imaginative staging, outstanding performers, and a consistently innovative, varied and challenging repertoire of work.



What makes Theatre @ Risk unique is that at its core it is a company that is committed to creating innovative new work, from commissions, dramaturgical explorations and development right through to realization in performance

Theatre @ Risk has consistently provoked its audience, in terms of content, style and form. Its work has defied easy categorization by critics. The performances are intended to challenge: they entice, they excite and they tease.

Theatre @ Risk's productions to date include: *Polygraph & The B File* (nominated for three Green Room awards); *Arabian Night* (Green Room award for Best Sound Design); *7 Days 10 Years* (Green Room Award for Best New Australian play); *Stalking Matilda* (RE Ross Trust Premier's Playwright Award); *The Speculator*; *The Jungle*; *The Woman Before* and *One Way Street*.



*"Theatre @ Risk has proved itself to be one of the most important independent theatre companies in Australia right now". John Bailey, Beat, 2005*

*"Now in its fifth year, Theatre @ Risk remains true to its manifesto of producing theatre that's left of mainstream and politically conscious. The company prides itself on trying new ideas in form and content and deliberately shies away from narrative orthodoxy." The Australian, 2005*

*"Theatre @ Risk might just restore our faith in theatre." Herald Sun 2001*

*"This is not mainstream theatre. It is, in its unique way, more exciting than that, more on the edge, raw and sometimes rough." The Age, 2001*

*"Theatre @ Risk's production is quite possibly unlike anything you've seen before. You really will leave the performance feeling as if you've just woken from a strange and exquisite dream." Inpress, 2004*

*"Arabian Night is a delight; that rare and exciting phenomenon, something that stretches the imagination in unexpected ways... Once again we owe thanks to a fringe company for a glimpse of some of the most exciting contemporary drama from outside Australia." The Age, 2004*



**PRODUCTIONS CREDITS**

Writer	Noëlle Janaczewska
Director	Chris Bendall
Producer	Kirrilly Brentnall
Set & Costume Designer	Kellee Frith
Lighting Designer	Nick Merrylees
Video Designer	Kirrilly Brentnall
Composer & Sound Designer	Kelly Ryall

## Performers:

ANNA/ ANIA/ ANN	Carolyn Bock
NINA/ HELEN	Carol Patullo
RADEK/ TREVOR/ LOTHAR	Michael Bishop
RACHEL/ WENDY	Katie-Jean Harding
PAUL/ JOE	Toby Newton

## SYNOPSIS

Anna Lubansky shoots to prominence with her first novel *MRS PETROV'S SHOE*, the emotional narrative of a 9-year-old girl's struggle to reconcile her Australian reality with her parents' Central European heritage. Promoted as heavily autobiographical, Anna's multicultural star shines brightly in the literary firmament - until the real fiction is exposed: Anna Lubansky is actually Ann Loxton. Does it matter if the novel is a record of her own experiences, or the product of a vivid imagination? How did she manage to draw so many people into her invented world?

Lubansky's book is set in the Cold War era of the early 1960s. It's the drama of the Latkiewicz family, viewed through the eyes of Ania, who embraces with gusto the prevailing national anxiety about spies—to the extent that she even suspects her own parents. Who is the shadowy figure hiding out by the railway line? Why does her mother visit him? Who is X? Is her father really in hospital, or on a secret mission? And why is their cat called Moscow?

The Queen provides the pivot for a transformation, as we jump forward some 25 years from 1963, and the Latkiewicz family morph into the Loxtons, where 14-year-old Ann is starting to imagine a more interesting life for herself.



Back in the present, a new story breaks, the real fiction is uncovered: Anna Lubansky is Ann Loxton. Is this reworking of her identity an act of post-modern bravado or simply fraud? Is she psychologically disturbed? What led her to swap suburban Australia for Poland?

Inspired in part by a number of recent Australian (and overseas) literary scandals involving the author's identity, *MRS PETROV'S SHOE* is a portrait of a complex and unstable psyche. The play comprises 4 parts, with each movement asking us to reconsider its predecessor. The first part, constructing the myth, is essentially a monologue, Anna's award acceptance speech. The second part, writing the myth, is a dramatisation of Anna's award-winning novel. In the third section, a transformation takes place, as the Polish-Australians morph into an Anglo family. The final part is when the myth falls apart, and Anna Lubansky is revealed as Ann Loxton, daughter of Helen and Trevor. This fourth section takes the form of (fictionalised) documentary/verbatim theatre.

*MRS PETROV'S SHOE* is a non naturalistic work that features non linear narrative, humour, transformation of character, time and place, original music and sound design. The play asks the question where does fact end and fiction begin?

## WRITER'S STATEMENT

*"Demidenko/Darville could be described as a spy who cross-dresses to infiltrate ethnic circles and to bring back dispatches to the Anglo-Celtic minority ..."*

- Sneja Gunew.

*"Benjamin was a cipher ... The author of 'Fragments' offered himself up time and time again as a universal placeholder for inexpressible and unappeasable absences ... Each one of us used Benjamin in our own way, and in doing so we gave him substance, we made him real."*

- Blake Eskin, "A Life In Pieces".

*"Khouri misled everyone who read and believed her book. Dalia did not exist, because Khouri was not in Jordan when the events of the book ... took place. 'Forbidden Love' is a fiction written by a woman who lived in Chicago from the age of three ..."*

- Malcolm Knox, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 2004.

These days it seems, we're surrounded by writers who are not who they claim to be. Are these various reworkings of individual identity acts of post-modern chutzpah or simply acts of fraud? Does it matter if, for example, Benjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments* is a record of his own experiences of an Auschwitz childhood or written with the licence of fiction? Whether Norma Khouri's central character is a composite constructed from an amalgam of sources? And if the writing is powerful and skilfully crafted, why do we care if Nasdijj is really a Native American or the alter ego of Tim Barrus, a none-too-successful b-grade writer? Or is it the case that every time invention masquerades as truth, real events and experiences are eroded and relegated to the revisionary realms of myth and legend?

Over the course of developing *MRS PETROV'S SHOE* I came to suspect that literary hoaxes with their vanishing authors, broken compacts and disingenuous explanations unsettle our ideas about truth, duplicity, and literature. As I was researching and writing the play, one question in particular, kept recurring: What do these scams tell us about ourselves, our society and its values? And the more I explored the material, the more I noticed that hoaxes are beautifully unpredictable things, frequently escaping the control of their creators. I wanted this notion to inform the play's form and structure. So *MRS PETROV'S SHOE* is not only a portrait of a complex and quite possibly unstable psyche, but also a script in 4 parts, in which each movement asks us to reconsider and re-evaluate its predecessor.

Noëlle Janaczewska  
March 2006



Helen Darville



Norma Khouri



Benjamin Wilkomirski



## DIRECTOR NOTES

In approaching directing *Mrs' Petrov's Shoe*, I was first and foremost attracted to the way that the author Noëlle Janaczewska explores cultural identity in the play. Through the character of Anna / Ann / Ania, Noëlle has managed to explore the puzzling contradictions in Australians' attitudes to multiculturalism today in an intelligent and complex way, whilst still telling a thoroughly engaging and entertaining story.

This play works thematically on a number of levels in its examination of the marginalisation of non-Anglo Australians, whilst counter-pointing this with the irony that many Anglo-Australians are envious of the ethnic origins of their neighbours believing that their own culture is somehow empty in comparison – a new cultural cringe of sorts. The Helen Demidenko / Darville affair is a perfect analogy for this curious trend in Australian culture, and serves to highlight the link between cultural practice (in this case literary practice) and cultural origins.

The play is also an examination of the effects of fear and paranoia on a society and how that affects a young generation. In the 1950s and 60s, the prevailing atmosphere of fear of communism easily translated into fear of those of Russian or Eastern European origin. We see this fear carried through to a young girl, who begins to suspect her mother of being a communist spy. With new terror and sedition laws just enacted by the current parliament, now is the perfect time to look at what paranoia, censorship and prevention of civil liberties can do to a society. Looking back at the Cold War era with hindsight, and with humour, seemed an ideal way to explore the dangers of revisiting those troubled times.

I was also attracted by the notion of lies and subterfuge. Throughout the play characters lie and attempt to conceal their lies, especially the character of Anna / Ann / Ania. There is an atmosphere of suspicion and fear around the world of the characters, and what this ultimately means for Anna is that she gets lost in her own imaginary constructed world.

The parallels between the 'play within a play' of Ania's story, and the larger story as a whole about the author of the novel, who has invented a fantasy world for herself and lost herself within that fantasy, are what also interest me in the play. How to present this concept of a dual layer of meaning throughout, and the concept of 'playing roles' seems to be one of the challenges of directing the play.

Noëlle has a wonderful sense of lyricism in her use of language. She is a significant voice in Australian theatrical writing, and this is an important addition to her already considerable repertoire. It is the play's clear and rigorously intelligent debate of issues on a number of levels simultaneously that make this a rich and complex work that will engage with a wide cross-section of audiences, and will engage with Melbourne's rich tapestry of multicultural communities.

Theatre @ Risk has an established history of presenting contemporary theatrical works, which engage in intelligent debate with complex social issues of our times. The company's work has been primarily engaged with the issue of cultural identity and cultural collisions, and this new work fits perfectly in the company's theatrical and thematic aims, forming a very strong new addition to the company's existing repertoire.

## PERFORMANCE STYLE

Noëlle playfully presents the play in four parts, each part requiring a different performance style. The play explores numerous theatrical devices, naturalistic and non-naturalistic, incorporating elements of satire, multiple role-playing, monologue, non-linear narrative and incorporation of video imagery with live performance.

We will be exploring a heightened physical performance style for the work, with Carolyn Bock playing both the 40-year author Anna as well as the 9 and 14 year old Ania and Ann whilst the chorus of four other performers plays the remainder of the on-stage characters. The challenge for all performers will be for full and rapid physical transformations into each of their characters. We will be seeking to explore the contrasting styles of the work to the full, from the light and childlike innocence of the initial 1960s scenes through to their sense of darkness, mystery and paranoia as the suspicions and hunt for spies within the family increase, to the vox pop documentary realism of the final section.

We will also be exploring as a company an additional layer of physical performance in the work, involving a heightened and abstract physical performance language, furthering the explorations of the company into non-naturalistic performance technique. This physical score will weave through the entire performance, exploring abstract movement, and drawing on the dance and physical theatre background especially of Carolyn Bock.

The vocal layer of the production will also be heightened as we bring out both the poetic and rhythmic specifics of the author's dialogue, as well as heightening the cultural differences expressed between the various worlds of the play.

We will be seeking to use mixed media throughout to allow the audience to visualize more clearly the time and period of the play. Images will recur throughout the production as a means of establishing location, and as a means of evoking mood and atmosphere as well as adding an additional visual layer to the work. The use of pre-recorded image will come to the fore in the final section where the 'vox pop' documentary sequence will be created through a marriage of video 'interviews', recorded by documentary film-maker Kirrilly Brentnall, and live performance on stage.



## PRODUCTION NOTES

Composer & sound-designer Kelly Ryall, will be involved closely with the production in creating his original score for the work, underscoring the comic elements of the work whilst incorporating the sense of cultural collision between the Australian and Polish origins of the piece. The music will assist in bringing on stage the Slavic heritage that Ania, Nina and Radek embody and that Ann and Anna can only conjure up in their imaginations.

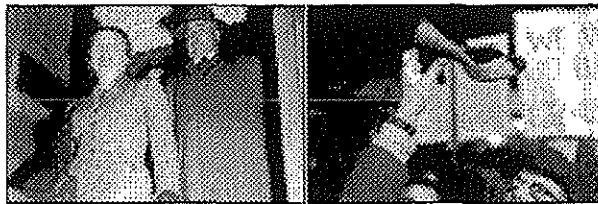
In the production's re-imagining of Australia in the 1960s, designer Kellee Frith will integrate the still and moving projections created for the production in her design, as well as taking inspiration from the central concept of 'disguise' evoked in the play

The set design for *Mrs Petrov's Shoe* explores the real and imagined spaces and experiences of Anna Lubansky. The set is fractured to present fragments of each of Anna's worlds simultaneously and the playing space dissolves and transforms from one decade and location to another as Anna's storytelling dictates.

The 'shoe' in the title of the play also takes on symbolic reference in the play's set design, through highlighting the different shoes worn by Anna/Ann/Ania throughout the play. This will be one way that the central character transforms between her various personas.

The costume designs for *Mrs Petrov's Shoe* are shot through with references to traditional Polish costume, as well as assisting the characters in developing their heightened and physical performance style. As individual performers play several roles each, each character's appearance will be striking enough to guide the audience through the characters who populate the play, whilst also making strong statements about their positions within the imaginary worlds that Anna has conjured up.

In all the design, our aim will be to make it clear that each world that we are witnessing is a construct of Anna's imagination, and the sense that this environment and playing area is a fabrication, and potentially fictitious or imaginary will be key design feature.



Evdokia and Vladimir Petrov leave the High Court in Melbourne in 1954 & Mrs Petrov's Shoe.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

On the afternoon of 19 April, 1954 Evdokia Petrov, wife of a recently defected Soviet spy was dragged, weeping and one foot bare, across the tarmac at Sydney's Mascot Airport to be sent back to the USSR. Forty years later in 1994, Helen Demidenko released 'The Hand that signed the paper' about her experience growing up a Ukrainian Australian to widespread critical acclaim, before being unmasked as not quite the authentic ethnic spokesperson she claimed to be.

*MRS PETROV'S SHOE* is a beautifully comic and thoroughly entertaining new play, reflecting on the state of multiculturalism in Australia from the past to the present day.

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### The Petrov Affair

Vladimir Petrov was not only the Third Secretary of the Soviet Embassy in Canberra but also a spy. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of April, 1954 he secretly applied for political asylum in Australia. Mr Petrov subsequently revealed to ASIO details of his secret surveillance on 'anti-Soviet' émigré communities in Australia.



Two weeks later, his wife Mrs Evdokia Petrov (believing her husband had been kidnapped) was dragged onto a plane in Sydney by Soviet officials to be taken back to Russia. The Australian Prime Minister at that time, Mr Robert Menzies rang the plane's captain and offered Mrs Petrov asylum when the plane landed in Darwin. After much indecision, media glare, and weighing up her great fear for family back in Russia, Mrs Petrov decided to defect with her husband.



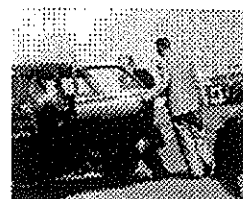
These dramatic events were reported worldwide. The photos of Evdokia being dragged along the tarmac, weeping and shoeless by MVD (Soviet Intelligence) agents at Sydney Airport, have become iconic images of the 1950s.

The Petrovs lived the rest of their days in relative obscurity in Melbourne, however the political ramifications continued for decades and the Petrov Affair is now viewed as one of the most significant events in Australia's political history.

### The Cold War

After World War II, anxieties about Soviet expansion and communist infiltration were at all time high in the Western World, including Australia. This period of time from 1945 to 1989 was known infamously as the Cold War where the USA and her allies were pitted against the Eastern Bloc headed by the Soviet Union.

Prime-Minister Menzies had tried to ban the Communist party in Australia in the late 40's without success. In 1954, he announced to the House of Representatives that Petrov had brought with him documents concerning Soviet espionage in Australia, and announced a Royal Commission to investigate the matter. The defections came shortly before the 1954 federal election, and became a matter of partisan politics when Dr H.V.Evatt (Labour Federal Leader) accused Menzies of having arranged the defection to coincide with the elections, for the benefit of the ruling Liberal Party.



According to some, partly as a result of the Petrov Affair, Menzies was successful at the election, which Labor had been widely expected to win. The Royal Commission continued for the rest of 1954, and uncovered some evidence of espionage for the Soviet Union by some members and supporters of the Communist Party of Australia during and immediately after World War II, but no one was ever charged with an offence as a result of the Commission's work, and no major spy ring was revealed.

For many the Petrov Affair was proof that the 'Cold War' had indeed reached the shores of Australia and the idea that the 'Reds (communists) were under every bed.'

## The Demidenko/Darville Literary Scandal

Brisbane writer, Helen Darville wrote the novel *The Hand that Signed the Paper* under the pseudonym Helen Demidenko, claiming she had based her work on stories told to her by her Ukrainian family; it was later revealed she had fabricated her background.



*The Hand that Signed the Paper* describes the experiences of Ukrainian brothers who survive Stalinism only to become members of the Nazi Einsatzgruppen death squads and ultimately Australian citizens. By concentrating on the experience of Ukrainian perpetrators to the exclusion of Jewish victims led to accusations of anti-Semitism.

However the book was widely acclaimed at the time, winning the The Australian/Vogel Literary Award, the Australian Literature Society Gold Medal, and the Miles Franklin Award (the most prestigious literary award in Australia).

After the Miles Franklin, a media furore ensued when it was revealed that the Demidenko identity was false.

*"I used to make a joke a few years ago that I considered myself a 'PAM', which is a Pure Australian Mongrel. But I do get this feeling at times, I just sit there and I think, 'Well what am I? And where do I fit in?'. And I tend to look at myself as being just a multicultural Australian, a person of diverse ethnic background who rather than sweeping those under the carpet, is proud of all of them and all aspects of them. Because Northern Ireland isn't exactly the world's prettiest historical circumstance either, and that's where the other half of the family comes from" – Darville/Demidenko on the Ukrainian SBS program*

Demidenko/Darville claimed she was using the artist's imagination to validate the historical references in the book and to reinforce its veracity she stated that it came from her own family's life story. Furthermore by winning the Miles Franklin award she was widely acclaimed as representing the ethnic voice and putting forward an historical veracity. When her duplicity was revealed to the literary judges, they stood by their decision to award her the coveted literary prize. One judge was quoted as saying "Initially, I assumed she had been given the material by family or others. Then when it came out she had so immersed herself, it made it an even more extraordinary work of literary imagination."

Many critics of Helen Darville have argued that by misrepresenting her true background through devices such as wearing ethnic dresses, dyeing her hair blonde and deploying Ukrainian words in speeches was fraud, not just a work of extraordinary fiction. Darville claimed she was not anti-Semitic, but merely telling the truth based on her own experiences as a person of Ukrainian descent. This proved problematic when it was revealed that she is really of British origin and was just using the cloak of ethnicity to garner an aura of 'authenticity' for her writing. Further criticism has been levelled at Darville that her book *The Hand that Signed the Paper* was not based in any historical truth and that ultimately had assumed for herself a false, crude and stereotypic ethnic identity that was insulting to many and in her incapacity to distinguish between fact and fiction she created a psychological bond with war criminals.

*"So I learned to take pride in my bedraggled pack of scrappy people and to reclaim my Effie accent" – Helen Darville/Demidenko*

## Other Literary Hoaxes

### Norma Khouri

'*Forbidden Love*', a book about an honour killing in Jordan, was purported to be an autobiographical account of the author's childhood. The book became a best seller in the West, but it was later discovered that the author Norma Khouri had lived all her life in America and had made up the story of her best friend, a Muslim being killed for entering into a relationship with a Christian. Critics accused Khouri of presenting simple stereotypes of the Middle East. Others argued that although the book may be fiction the events described in the book are indicative of real conditions. This is counter-acted with the charge that publishers prefer books that offer a sensational perspective rather than a story that is nuanced and complex in its portrayal of characters.



### The Ern Malley Affair

In 1943 two Poets who shared a dislike for the pretensions of modern poetry, submitted the work of a fake poet, Ern Malley to the Angry Penguins literary magazine. McAuley & Stewart (the poets behind the fictional Ern Malley) rapidly wrote sixteen poems that mixed in random lines, misquotations and created what they believed was bad verse, garnered from Shakespeare, a dictionary of misquotations and a report on the breeding grounds of mosquitoes amongst others. They submitted the work from Ern Malley's imaginary sister Ethel, complete with a cover note explaining what a tragic life the faux poet had led before his early death. The editor of the Angry Penguins, Max Harris exclaimed Ern Malley's work to be that of a genius and published the work. Shortly after this it was revealed in the press in June 1944 to be a hoax.



## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

The following suggested questions are designed for the adaptation to individual teaching styles and learner needs.

### PRIOR TO SEEING THE PERFORMANCE

How would you stage the production?

If you were playing the role of Anna/Ann how would you go about indicating and performing the changes in character?

How would you indicate the change in age for Anna/Ann?

Why do you think the playwright split the play into four parts?

How would you describe the style of each part?

### INITIAL RESPONSES AFTER VIEWING THE PRODUCTION

What are your initial impressions of the work?

What did you like/dislike about the performances?

How did the performance differ to your first reading of the play?

What did you think of the historical references alluded to in the video design?

### DESCRIBING THE WORK

Describe what is unique about Theatre @ Risk's approach to the play?

How did design elements contribute to the meaning of the production?

How would you describe the style of the production?

In what way did performance style influence the meaning of the production?

How effective was the use of time and rhythm?

How effective was the performer's use of stagecraft?

How did the doubling of characters influence the meaning of the production, and how effectively was this achieved in performance?

How were non-naturalistic devices employed in the performance?

Specifically considering the design of the production, how did design elements of sound, lighting, set and costume create a non-naturalistic performance space?

What theatrical symbols reoccurred throughout the production? How effective did you find the use of these symbols in creating meaning in the production?

How did the performance environment affect your viewing of the performance?