

# SALT



PETA MURRAY

## **AUSTRALIAN SCRIPT CENTRE**

This education resource is published and distributed by the Australian Script Centre, trading as AustralianPlays.org. The Australian Script Centre, a national not-for-profit organisation, has been selectively collecting outstanding Australian playscripts since 1979 and is home to a comprehensive and extraordinary catalogue of production-ready plays.

## **ALL RIGHTS RESERVED**

This work is protected by Australian and international copyright law. You have a legal obligation to obtain permission before making copies of this education resource. Contact details for further information are provided below.

## **MAKING COPIES**

Beyond this single use, you may not copy or print this education resource without the written permission of Malthouse Theatre, even if you are covered by a Copyright Agency Limited (CAL) statutory licence.

## **COPYRIGHT ADVICE**

For detailed information on copyright issues, please contact the [Australian Copyright Council](#).

## **PRODUCTION RIGHTS**

Before producing or performing any play you must obtain the permission of the relevant rightsholder. Fees will vary according to the nature and scale of the proposed production. They are set at the discretion of the relevant rightsholder (usually the playwright or their agent). As a general guide, AustralianPlays.org recommends 10% of gross box office receipts or \$100 per performance, whichever is greater, as the minimum fee for amateur production. Your [production enquiry](#) may be submitted through the AustralianPlays.org website.

## **PERMISSIONS FOR SOUND RECORDINGS & MUSIC**

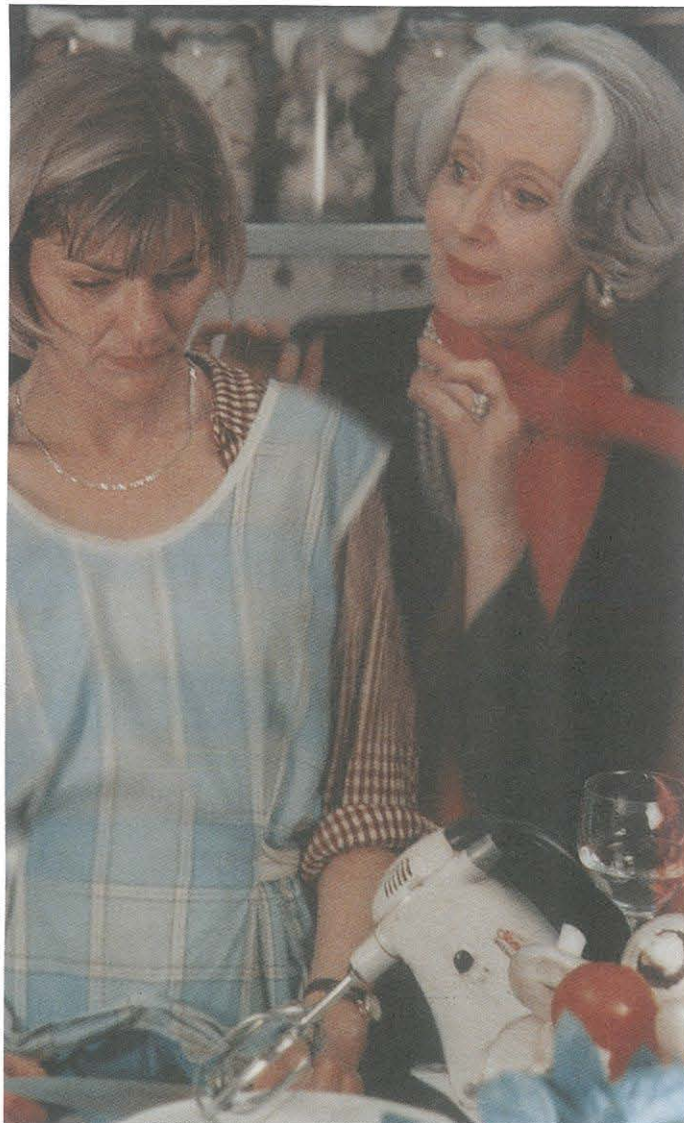
Some playscripts will require specific published sheet music or sound recordings for which performing rights may need to be separately licensed. Producers are advised to contact the [Australasian Performing Rights Association](#) (APRA) for more information on music licensing requirements.

play  
box.

*PRESENTS*  
*The World Premiere of*

salt  
salt

*by Peta Murray*



For more information  
regarding Playbox  
Education 2001,  
Contact:  
Margaret Steven or  
Meg Upton on:  
9685 5165  
Monday - Friday

© Playbox 2001

BACKGROUND NOTES

Playbox at The Malthouse 113 Sturt Street Southbank Victoria 3006  
Administration (03) 9685 5100 Box Office (03) 9685 5111 Facsimile (03) 9685 5112 Email [admin@playbox.com.au](mailto:admin@playbox.com.au) Website [www.playbox.com.au](http://www.playbox.com.au)  
Playbox Theatre Company Limited ABN 58 006 885 463

Playbox, affiliated with  
**VICTORIA UNIVERSITY**

## **INTERVIEW WITH PETA MURRAY – PLAYWRIGHT FOR “SALT”**

### ***What was your initial inspiration for writing “Salt”?***

That is rather a difficult question to answer because the first thing I need to tell you is that it's taken about ten years for me to write this play. I've had files on my computer and the name of the play knocking around since the late 1980's. So it's really difficult to go back and remember exactly what the starting point was. However, there are a few things that must come together in the answering of your question. One is that of my own love of food has been a big part of the push to write the play. It's an element that novelists can write about, poets can find imagery for and artists can paint, so I thought, “Is there a way that I can celebrate food through my playwriting?” That was one part of it. Another part of it is my fascination with the different languages that people, particularly women use to talk with one another. Then, of course, there are so many other languages that aren't verbal, that contain whole layers of meaning, whole dialogues, a great deal of subtext and often a lot of emotion. It seemed to me that the way that women use food and express themselves through food was an interesting thing to explore in the space that is the stage. Beyond these there were different, other inspirations that arrived at different times and helped pushed the play towards its final shape.

### ***I think you've gone some way into explaining the importance of and the role of food, but how does that fit into your play?***

The beautiful thing about food is that it's many, many things in the one moment. It's the stuff of the every day, it's the stuff of life, it's the thing that we need in order to sustain us and to continue to live. To breathe in and out we must eat. At the same time, as well as having this every day mundane function, it also is a kind of sacred element. All the ingredients that are used in the play are all garden ingredients. There are no meat products, and that's not because I'm pushing any particular vegetarian line, but more a staging issue really. It seemed to me that for most of us who live in cities these days and who have precious little contact with nature that the evening food preparation is when we do commune with nature in our kitchen. It was this that has resonance.

I'm very interested in the poetic life of objects on stage. It seemed to me that food and the actual objects that are brought onto the stage have this wonderful metaphoric resonance the moment they appear. Sound the trumpets! Enter the eggplant! The appearance of real, colourful, natural food is a very powerful, potent moment.

The other aspect of food in this play comes down to the specifics of the choices I have made. The fact that food can be both nourishing and sickening. I was very interested in that paradox, the duality that existed there, and I also think that it's a very interesting area to explore particularly as far as women are concerned. Women have so many ambivalences about food. We love it. We can't stand it. We love to eat, but it's fattening. We watch what we eat because we're the wrong shape, or it's the wrong kind of food and we know we should be eating healthy food. Women have so many “issues” about food and it seemed to me that this was a paradox just begging to be explored.

***There are many actual recipes used in the play, and some quite technical language in relation to toxicology. What research did you undertake in order to write the play?***

Well the first layer of research was from daily life, from my desire to learn to cook. I come from a family where cooking was not particularly central to our lives. My mother can cook but she's not particularly interested in it. My father can cook but it is not a great love of his. So I learnt to cook from cookbooks. I learnt to cook from reading "Gourmet" magazine before it became "Gourmet Traveller". That's where my cooking education tended to come from.

I also found both as a writer and as somebody who loves language (I was an English teacher for some time) that the writing in cookbooks, particularly by such greats as Elizabeth David and Jane Grigson is wonderful. You don't just read them for the food, you read them because they're beautifully written. Another great writer, MFK Fisher, was an absolute inspiration to me. Her writing on food was quite exceptional and opened my eyes to the possibility of celebrating food through language. So therein lies the first part of the research – me just learning how to cook from the writings of others.

When I finally got to the heart of what "Salt" was about and realised that it was the paradox of the toxic and the nourishing that was the hub, then I had to go out and begin to inform myself. There is a book you can buy called "Poisons for Writers". It is such a book that people who write crime stories, Agatha Christie for example, might use. There is in fact a great tradition of poisons being used in literature, so that was one source of information. The internet was another source. There is a wonderful site that deals with the history of ingredients where you can discover all kinds of interesting stuff. The only thing I need to say is that it is not necessarily all the gospel truth. Likewise the play. Some of what is said in the play about toxicology is truthful, some is creative. I don't intend for people to walk out of the theatre armed with infallible information, but I have included a snippet of something here and a snippet there, of something from a gardener, a cook book or from a site on the internet.

***So your intention is not really to inform but rather to celebrate food?***

Oh, I'm not trying to teach anybody. If they walk out with a few hints about cooking, a few ideas for recipes – great. But, no I'm not really trying to teach. I think I am asking people to look at what they eat and ask themselves are they getting the "sacred" part of food? Or are they just eating because they are hungry? For me it is a case of celebrating the social aspects of eating, the colour, shape and form of food, aspects other than just keeping the body together.

***For me, "Salt" is choreography in the kitchen. Does the preparation and cooking of the food serve to underscore the dialogue?***

Yes, it does.

***How did you go about choreographing or marrying the dialogue with the action?***

It's guesswork mainly, until now, when we're in the rehearsal room and testing the ballet that was enacted in my head to see whether it's actually physically possible. The good news for me is that most of it is actually physically possible. Your choice of the word "underscore" is a really interesting one because what we're already finding is that the sounds of the kitchen implements are the score, and we haven't even turned on the gas yet! We have the hisses to come, the sound of the food, and the smell of the food will be another layer. It is like conducting women through this space and cooking is about rhythm. Good cooks have timing, rhythm and precision. On the other hand, every day I feel like going into the rehearsal room and saying, "I'm so sorry about all the props. I'm sorry about all the business". It is really very hard for the actors. Not only are they trying to be the characters, say the dialogue and feel the feelings, but they're also having to chop an onion, or squeeze a lemon or grate a vegetable and it certainly isn't easy.

***Is there something very satisfying about making that choreography work?***

It's quite mesmerizing really. There are moments when the actors stop talking and we just find ourselves looking at what they're doing. It has always been a fascination of mine to watch people, especially confident people, cook. It is really very satisfying to watching them working. That is why we all turn on to watch "The Naked Chef" or Stephanie. Because they are rhythmic and musical and artistic.

***Aside from food, what do you see as being the main themes in this play?***

"Salt" is a play about love and forgiveness, and a play about a relationship – a very tempestuous relationship between a mother and a daughter. It is about the wounds and the scars and the unsaid things in their lives. It is a play about two people who have grown apart from each other and I suppose there is a type of journey towards reconciliation that occurs in the course of the play.

It is a play about women and sexuality – I think that too is a really strong part of the story. It is becoming increasingly apparent to me that it is a play about the potency of food as a healing device, as a way of joining people together, of remembering the intimacy of feeding as a mother feeds a child. The repair that comes out of those actions is very strong in a woman's world.

I think those are the main things that the play is about. I'm not sure whether many playwrights can answer this type of question confidently. In many ways I am only now starting to find out what it's really about. I know it is about two women in the kitchen but the actors are showing me that it is about love, about sexuality and about pain. These discoveries are the best bit really.

***How closely are the design elements linked to your vision of the final product?  
Did you work closely with Trina (set designer) and Rachel (lighting designer)?***

We had a workshop late last year, and because it is such a practical play, because there is real cooking to be done, the design is absolutely crucial to the workings of the

play. In most rehearsal periods, the actors would not have the full set until about five days before the play opens whereas, in this case, it seemed absolutely essential to have the set and to have the props there from day one. This is because the actors have to really own the space. In the workshop we tended to just test the play on its feet and the actors got up and did a reading, imagining where they would have to be when a certain line was said and the kinds of rhythms that the play required of them. Out of that Trina Parker started to form her impressions. She didn't pass them on to me. She spoke with Aubrey initially, but it was very clear to me even in that early stage that we were all on the same wavelength. And likewise with Rachel Burke (lighting Designer). It was quite exciting in the first couple of readings because there was this feeling like, "Yes! They get it!"

The other really strong element of the play is the presence of the garden. Other designers had looked at this play in workshop and one designer in particular was rather taken by the garden. There is a very strong presence of the garden in the play and the idea of food coming from the kitchen garden, the garden being barren at one stage, able to provide food for the family, or overgrown at another was an important part of the design element. In this case it was the actors showing me what was in the play. I had a very strong sense of it in my head. I call the head "the seeing place" when I'm writing. It's not that I actually have pictures, but I feel I have a very strong sense of emotion and of the movement of something. In the end if it works, it works, if it doesn't then the director and designer can change it.

### ***So you are quite happy for alterations to occur during the rehearsal process?***

The director and the actors have to make it work and it is usually fairly obvious when something is not going to work, if it isn't going to flow, or something is going to hold up the action for too long. So much of playwriting and acting is rhythm and the flow of it. Sometimes I feel like saying, "Do it again, try to make it work before I rewrite it". But they are already doing that. They try it many different ways before we declare something is impossible.

### ***How would you define the style of "Salt"?***

"Salt" begins by appearing to be a naturalistic, kitchen sink, domestic piece of theatre. Two women in a kitchen, with the trappings of real life, using time and place and space in the way that life does. But it is also a play about memory and I suppose that is what I omitted when you initially asked me what the play was about. When you watch it being built by the actors suddenly you know what it is about, the structure and shape start to form. Memory is interesting. Like the structure of this play memory can function in a continuous time and a continuous place but suddenly it begins to fragment and fracture. When I look at "Salt", those schisms in time become more frequent as the play progresses, mirroring what is going on in Laurel's head. In Laurel we have a character who is actually experiencing – I'm not naming it Alzheimer's disease - but she is experiencing a disturbance in her memory function, and the onset of some kind of dementia or some kind of condition. And so that what's occurring in her memory allows me to do interesting things in time and space, and out of that comes a shift in style.

Therefore, in terms of style you might call it impressionistic, or perhaps magic realism. The fact that the play can support a number of different threads of narrative simultaneously, all inter-woven actually transforms it from a naturalistic play into something else. The arrival of the man adds weight to this.

An image in the play encapsulates this shift for me. There is a scene in the middle of the play where Meg is standing in a cafeteria and she smells a smell, and she has her tray with a bowl and a plate and a knife and fork, and she is overtaken by this smell. The tray tilts and everything slides off. It falls and it shatters on the ground. That image, that journey was, for me, a guide in the energy and shape of the play. It is like the tray intact with the bowl and the cutlery at the beginning of the play and, in slow motion, as the play proceeds, the tray tilts and everything slides and, by the end, we're in pieces. That was what I was trying to write.

***How would you describe the character of The Man?***

Well, we haven't talked about the man yet and I imagine that, from a schools' point of view, he will be one of the most curious parts of the play in terms of his function. He is this free floating character who suddenly appears – and at this stage it looks as if he is going to appear in the broom cupboard or appear in the oven or even in the refrigerator – and he is a different layer of action. His character brings a new level of meaning and one of commentary. It's as if he is superimposed on the real action, the real narrative between Laurel and Meg. I suppose you could say that is "magical". He is able to conjure up ingredients as required and take them away as required.

That's the thing I love about the theatre, you are able to use space in unconventional, non-linear magical ways. I'm not interested in theatre that does things that television and film can do much faster and slicker. I'm interested in what theatre can do differently and of physical space. That's why I choose to write in this style.

***To continue with the character and function of The Man, sometimes he is recognised and acknowledged, but other times he isn't. Is that process changing as the rehearsals progress?***

His role and function are changing because we are looking for the rules that govern him. He is there and he makes sense but we need, from a convention point of view, we need to know the rules that govern his character. Can they see him? Can they not? If they can see him, when can they see him? Can both of them see him? It's becoming clearer and clearer that normally it's Meg who can see and hear him, but when Laurel is deep in her memory he can become the men in her life so he can become her father, he can become her husband. I've always regarded The Man as an "ingredient" and that's given me a great deal of flexibility with him because as an ingredient he is immutable, he is transformable. You add heat and he turns into this. You add water and he turns into that. Once I realised that it gave me a great degree of flexibility.

Also, his journey mirrors that journey and structure I was talking about before of something appearing to be real through to something that becomes fragmented only, for The Man, it is reversed. He's barely there at all in the first act of the play, in fact he just appears at the very end of it. But his hold on the play gets stronger and stronger



and stronger as Laurel goes back in time. And by the last act of the play he's there all the time but her sense of time and place is not. He develops his own band of dialogue as well. So that is an interesting part of the narrative and stylistic structure for me.

***Do you see playwrights in Australia as having a particular role to play in society?***

Oh I'm sure that we do. I'm not sure that I can articulate what it is. I think each of us have our own unanswered questions, or our own drum to beat. I am a political person but I don't feel I'm a particularly political writer. I write from a place of enquiry of my own. It is very personal. I write from questions that I can't answer. In "Salt" it is "What is this thing that goes on between mothers and daughters in the kitchen?" That's what I write about and it's not going to change the world but perhaps it may make people talk about these things. I certainly hope it makes people think about these things.

I don't have any illusions about changing lives. There are other playwrights who are much better at holding up a mirror to our society and giving us a much broader view of the world. I am more drawn to the particular and the small, the tiny detail, the nuance rather than the big picture. Hopefully with different playwrights writing about what they see and what they hear we are being given a broad view of the world and society. I have my own small part to play in it but I don't see myself as a social commentator in any way.

***But you choose to do that in writing for the theatre as opposed to television or film. Why is that important?***

I'm passionate about theatre. I've always had a deep love. It goes back to childhood and it's a bug that I can't get rid of. I've tried to have real jobs, tried to do other things, tried to stay away. Many times I will see performances that do nothing for me and then suddenly I will see something that excites me and I remember why I love it. For example the "Cloudstreets" of the world remind us of how exciting the theatre is and about what theatre can do.

***What do you hope an audience will be thinking as they leave the theatre after seeing "Salt"?***

I hope they are excited about what they see. They also have a job to do as audience members in making sense of what they see. I don't want to present the audience with a nice neat narrative. There will be questions that they may not be able to answer easily and they may leave the theatre comparing and asking questions that they may not be able to answer. They may leave the theatre discussing how they read the play or how they interpreted various scenes. I hope they will be feeling hungry. I hope that we will have driven them mad with food and the look of food and the smells of food and they will probably want to go out and eat something.

But "Salt" is also a very moving play. It is very sad and it is very funny as well. So I hope that emotionally they will feel that they've been touched in some way. That, for me, is often a goal to have stirred my audience members so that they are not the same people who walked into the theatre as those who are walking out.

## INTERVIEW WITH AUBREY MELLOR - DIRECTOR OF "SALT"

### ***What initially attracted you to the role of directing Peta Murray's play "Salt"?***

I admire Peta as a writer. I've known her for many years, and her highly acclaimed work. The fact that she worked in communities, created work for companies and worked very closely with actors is important. She's a person of the theatre, and her integrity in terms of content, the way she structures, and every now and then experiments with form, fascinates me. And, of course, for Peta it's quite unusual to write a full length play; It's many years since her award winning "Wallflowering".

About ten years ago, I employed her in Queensland (in my role as Artistic Director of QLD Theatre Company) to write a tribute to the life of Oodgeroo Noonuccl, which we called "One Woman Song", and she worked with Kath Walker (indigenous poet and activist) in the days just before she died, to construct a biographical movement, poetry, music performance and I also programmed her wonderful play for young people "Spitting Chips". So I've had quite a long history with Peta Murray. It was primarily my admiration and respect for her as a writer that initially prompted me to want to direct "Salt", because the play probably should be directed by a woman, for the reason that it is so much mother-and-daughter in its content. Given the fact that Julia Blake and Victoria Eagger (Laurel and Meg) have very strong mother-daughter awareness made me feel, "Oh, fine, they can bring all that to it and also have the presence of Peta throughout the rehearsals".

I think that I just wanted to bring Peta's work into Playbox and I think that Peta felt comfortable with me directing it because I had already directed a workshop of it at the National Playwrights Conference. I wanted to personally look after Peta's play rather than being particularly attracted to or knowledgeable about mother-daughter relationships. Certainly, cooking is something that I find interesting, and I love the idea of cooking on stage, but it isn't an expertise of mine.

### ***As a director did you have an involvement in the writing process or any influence on the development of the text from the initial workshop?***

Interestingly, when I first read the play I thought, "Oh, Heavens, it's a mother and daughter in the kitchen just talking!" In fact, on the page it appears on a cursory read to be quite inconsequential; you actually have to search for what it is about. In performance, of course, you can bring out the various dramatic elements that are part of the women's conversations. All the way through, the play is dotted with very important plot and theme moments. When I first read it I was looking for action. I thought, "Well, I don't quite understand the writers intent". Then I was asked to be involved with the playwright's conference and workshop it and I had the joy of putting it into action and discovering it with the actors, with Peta guiding us through. A very interesting aspect of the writer, is that Peta did not ever want anything to be obvious. There are many contradictions, and she juxtaposes so many different things, that there is no simple line. In fact, she likes the ambiguity, she likes the enigmas. So, the fact that I discovered the play in Peta's presence was very special particularly as Peta was seeing it brought to life for the first time.

I did have some influence on the writing process, but less than on most new plays I have directed. During the first workshop, Peter Mathieson, Dramaturg at MTC, was the dramaturg at the playwright's conference and he and Peta Murray would keep an eye on some of the back stories - the way in which the stories of the past come through into the present kitchen - and I was helping the actors make sense of some very poetic lines and trying to make it feel natural, especially with the chopping up of the food business. Peta took on board many of the discoveries of the workshop. Some of the speeches were originally monologues and we improvised with the actors to put two speeches together so that they overlapped, and then Peta rewrote them as a line from the mother, a line from the daughter and so on.

When we decided to include the play in Playbox's 2001 season, we workshopped it here and the play changed substantially again because of the action of the food. There were also some back stories, some dramatic lines that were a touch too ambiguous, that we felt were not clear enough for the audience, so some of those things I asked to be strengthened. We are still experimenting with the placement of the rearrangements of some sections. As a director I have often been involved in the order of scenes or require new scenes to be written but in this case, no, my input has been more subtle than usual. I think this has a great deal to do with the fact that Peta is so at home in the theatre as a writer, possibly more so than most writers because she is a theatre practitioner who writes, rather than a writer who writes for performance.

***Is it unusual for a writer to spend so much time in the rehearsal room as Peta Murray has done, and what impact, if any, has this had on you as a director?***

In my experience it is not unusual, in fact that's why I am at Playbox: because I enjoy working on new work and because we have the writer here with us. The problem with directing the classics is you ponder over some scene and often ask yourself what on earth a scene is about, or how to make an old-fashioned joke work. Of course, you can't say to William Shakespeare, "Would you mind rewriting this?" or, "What was your intention here?" Whereas with a contemporary writer you can say, "Well, what do you mean?" and the writer can tell you or suggest something and in that case we may need to rephrase that sentence, emphasize that word, or clarify something with a look. So it's wonderful to work with living playwrights. I love it. I would like the writer there all the time.

On the other hand, actors aren't happy about having the writer there all the time because actors, as part of their process, have to have time where they can tussle with the script and say, "If only it did this, but it only does that, why?". But they play those games with all scripts really. It's part of the process. But in the first week, when they are discovering it, examining it, pulling it apart and finding out what all the themes are, and what all the plot lines are then they love to be able to ask questions of the writer. But while they're making all their mistakes and exploring and arguing with the phraseology, they quite like being left alone and experienced playwrights always understands this. Peta is not dictatorial with actors, she enjoys their discoveries.

I'm not the sort of director that ever has secrets, so if I don't understand something I'll throw it back to the actor and say, "Well, I don't know what this really means, it could be this or it could be that". And whoever's in the room, be it an assistant, a stage manager, or an observer, I'm interested in anybody's comments on that process. I'm not a great believer in the secrecy of the rehearsal room. Obviously too many people can spoil people's concentration and concentration is extremely important in the rehearsal, but you can concentrate in a team when everyone knows how they fit together so deviously, the playwright is a crucial part of the team.

If you love a play and you're interested in what the play's about you should, in theory, be terribly interested in the person who created the play. It is possible not to get on with the playwright and I have sometimes had that experience. But in this case, it is wonderful because I think Peta Murray is a very interesting human being, apart from being an excellent writer. I love the way she thinks about the world. I love the way she has concluded certain things about the world and I often find I share her values. I respect her integrity.

***Did your role as director allow you to have any influence in the design of the set?***

Oh yes, always. In a good director-designer relationship, it's almost impossible to identify who did what. I've had design experience in my training and I know that a design is a visual framework of the conception. The concept usually starts with an offer from the director, then the director and the designer talk about the play and develop a concept together. It should never come just from the designer. A director should never just "fit" into a designer's concept, because that doesn't work. Sometimes you see a wonderful 'design', but the production, the play, doesn't quite happen. On the other hand, it shouldn't just come from a director. It could end up quite a mishmash, or else impractical and over-budget. I like the concept to come from both director and designer together, both thinking "What is the visual framework for this?". In the case of "Salt" I just wanted the table. I wanted the reality, to be on the table. I didn't mind how we did anything else, but I didn't really want a set, I just wanted the table, and I wanted the food, utensils, and objects to be conjured out of nowhere. We agreed we didn't want to have all these different kitchens. I wanted just one, but that would have been confusing. Trina had the brilliant idea of changing the positions of the same table.

The rest developed along the lines of "How do we put things in cupboards? What visual elements do we want?" As a result we have developed some special design elements with the lighting so we can focus upon the different food themes at different times and on different special props. Hopefully we can bring these images out of the blackness – a shimmer, or a glow on one shining red tomato.

Another visual dilemma was the scene at the end of the play where in memory they walk along a beach, where there are all these beautiful things - sand and salt and waves - and there is this woman with her father walking along a beach that is all broken crockery. We started with the idea that we would have something that was all crockery, great dinner plates, or a dinner service that actually got broken and gradually, from a fully formed object, it disintegrates into broken pieces, into bits and pieces, then visually we move into sand and pebbles. Finally the china is ground into sand then into salt. The concept was that the audience saw a lovely white soup tureen, for example, being broken down and turning into a line of salt across the stage. I thought that would be *the* main design symbol we'd have, and place it as a line of images across the front of the stage. But of course if we did that, you wouldn't see it because of the audiences' heads. So we've come up with a different concept.

There's also an idea that what was outside was a garden. All the natural elements were out on one side of the stage, and the interiors were the dark psychological and more civilised, manufactured things. Our idea was, we would go from the primitive to the civilised, right to left across the stage. We were going to have something that was a bit like a garden with natural fruits changing to preserved fruits in jars and then the jars (looking across the stage) would turn into books and the books would turn into cupboards and wardrobes. So you had a sense of the natural thing being packaged and processed. Again, we threw away that idea because, symbolically, they were too heavy handed and Peta's play is much more subtle. It doesn't quite make any really strong statement in any one scene.

Finally, hopefully, we are not going to have a very big visual statement there at all, apart from two women around a kitchen table. We will draw images into the scene from out of the blackness and the dark. These concepts come very much from thinking through the idea for the play with the designer, Trina Parker, as well as being visually sensitive. Trina is a great problem solver. There is an enormous amount of problems to be resolved with this play and Trina is a designer I admire and trust. Like me, she enjoys a challenge. When I direct a play by a woman I usually like to load the creative team with more women. I often have a woman designer working with me if I'm directing a women's play. In this case I have three women; a woman set designer, a woman who has designed the lighting, and a woman who has composed for the play. So I hope that I'm not bringing only masculine values to a rather delicate performance piece. If I were asked for one stylistic word, I would call it closest to impressionism.

***As the director of "Salt", how have you dealt with the marriage of dialogue with the movements and actions of the food? In other words how have you choreographed the rhythms of the text with the actual cooking of the food on stage?***

Well I love rhythm and I generally always work quite musically. In this case, all our work is attending to find a rhythm that's not too obvious. Initially one thinks "This is the rhythm of the scene" and when you read it, it seems to work; but once the actors start doing the actions with the text, the speech rhythms alter considerably. So we're having to find rhythms that are quite difficult to predict. Some actors can't just learn text because the action is part of the learning process; of connecting a word to an action.

The biggest problem is actually of workshopping both text and action so that it feels right. One discovers that a character can do a certain amount of action during a sequence of text. Then something will change, an interpretation or an ingredient, and consequently the rhythm will have to alter considerably and we have to go back and rethink the action. Sometimes an action is quite dramatically important: A character will say something quite vague and slip in a line that they hope won't be terribly offensive, then suddenly deflect by chopping an onion very quickly. You can see that this may demonstrate a nervousness about something; the chopping of the onion can make character statements, and also allow underlying themes to surface or have a particular focus.

The whole rehearsal process has been more like a workshopping explosion; actually, it's quite difficult. You think it's going to be fun, but it's really hard work. We all find it extremely challenging. It was fun for a while but then you realise we've got to make decisions. And there's often so many options; and if we change things, if we amalgamate two different concepts, take two different approaches to the action, one of the actors can be thrown because of having to merge both new interpretation and new action. It's also quite difficult to memorize, being fragmented or overlapping text. The body memory starts to remember the action as it was initially learnt and consequently changes to the action.

Then of course there is the sound. When you read it you think at a particular point in time, they're stirring onions in a frypan. But when you actually *hear* the sound of the wooden spoon in a frypan, you think, "Oh, I remember that!" and you suddenly realise that the audience is perhaps on this trip about sitting in a kitchen with their mother and possibly having some audio memory experience. The play *is* playing with all those ideas. The next element will be when the smells start to come through, hopefully that will be something else again for the audience. From a practical point of view we are also having a problem because the actors themselves are having to handle and smell different vegetables over and over. In performance it won't be a difficult, but in rehearsals one of our actors is allergic to mushrooms so whenever she goes near them her eyes start to stream, and somebody else is having the same problem with the onions. For the audience it will be magic, while in the rehearsal room we are wrestling with numerous difficulties.

The food aspect of realistic theatrical experience was born at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century with the advent of "naturalism" and "realism". In the French theatre at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, they had running water and real meat on stage, and it was considered revolutionary. Once film took over as the art form of naturalism theatre has gradually departed from this towards a more symbolic representation of those things. In the case of "Salt" it's like a return to things that one thought were really the realm of modern theatre.

In order to make that detail fascinating for the audience, I wanted to set the play in a small space, hence we are staging it in The Beckett. I know it's going to be a popular play because of the calibre of the cast - Julia Blake, Victoria Egger and Paul English- it's a very good cast. So the audience demand is probably going to be greater than we can fulfil, but if I were to put it in a large theatre, those special ingredients of the smell, and actually being in the kitchen with those women, this feeling would be lost. It's a fairly intimate play; Ironically however, it's a huge play for the women. It's actually bigger than playing Hedda Gabler or Rosalind in terms of text. The roles of Laurel and Meg are very demanding with both female characters on stage continuously. You could think "Oh, it's just a sweet little play about two women in the kitchen, very simple really: the exploration of a relationship over a number of years". But what it manages to explore, and how complex it is to stage, "Salt" feels huge.

***It is interesting that you should discuss the styles of Naturalism and Realism. How would you describe the style of "Salt"?***

Well, at first, the actors wanted to make it flow into something very normal and natural in the kitchen. The moment it does, however, I don't listen. It all blurs into just chat. I always think there's a large difference between conversation and dialogue. When you have a conversation the words just flow. It's generally inconsequential. But dramatic dialogue on stage is artificial. It's honed down, it's precise, it should never have too many words, nothing superficial. So what we're doing with the actors now is to lift the potential meaning out of simple conversation so that it has a significance. This doesn't mean that every word is deep and meaningful but, with a very deliberate use of text and subtext, the dialogue is elevated.

As a text, "Salt" exists very strongly within the words. I think it would work on radio because the words in themselves are beautiful and evocative, sometimes sharp and shattering, glistening, and they have lovely sensuous smells at times. When you're working around the kitchen table and just chatting about the past, you just get lulled into something comfortable. But the play is forever about competition between two women and you do need to keep bringing the edges out. So stylistically it's deceptively naturalistic. I'm having to sharpen it up, and bring very physical, arresting moments to it, to create what is artificial in many ways. As a director I'm doing this so that the audience can see the patterns as well as the action. I'm not doing it just because it feels natural and truthful. If performed totally naturalistically it would be blurry and appear quite inconsequential - similar to my first reading of the play.

"Salt" is really a play about memory and repressed memory and therefore we have played with symbolism in order to capture the almost surreal experiences that memory can create for us. Of course it's quite possible that the whole story is happening in the head of one of the characters so a more non-naturalistic approach is appropriate.

***Peta Murray and Trina Parker have both referred to "Salt" as being a female play, or a play for and about women. How do you react to that as a male director?***

Well, it is. That's right, and I can think of women directors who would do it very well too. It is going to be directed in both Perth and Sydney by women, so Peta will see productions by women. I think that a man should be able to direct plays by women just as women directors can interpret classics, such as Ibsen and Shakespeare. I have never questioned the validity of a woman directing plays by men; just as we should not, perhaps question the opposite. Some plays are very male oriented, like David Williamson's "The Club", and I so agree that "Salt" is very female oriented. When a play sort of pushes over a gender boundary you think, "Yes, there is some logic for a director being of the same "gender", and that is why I've loaded the production team with women, my designer and composer, who can guide me. I mean my production team can say, "Well, no, this aspect should really be drawn out further", and they can tell me if I'm going right off kilter. They're my safeguard.

Given that theatre has been dominated by men for hundreds of years I feel it is quite appropriate to redress the balance. It is also interesting that most of the ticket buying public are women and they usually influence the decisions as to what people are going to see. Men tend to go along with whatever women want to see and, generally speaking, they don't mind. Often it is a very interesting experience for men. "Secret Bridesmaids' Business" was a play with a focus on women, but as a man you sat there, hopefully, starting to understand women a bit more. You may think: "Oh I see, that's really what they do when men are not around. That's how they talk to each other". There's a part of women that men are not usually privy to - women's friendship and the way women relate to each other in private is very different to how men relate to each other when they're together. For men it can be fascinating. So I'm equally confident that men will find this play interesting, even though it won't touch them in the same way - because "Salt" is so much about the nerve endings within mother and daughter relationships.

On the other hand there is a male character in the play and all will respond to "the Man". The role played by Paul English is a sort of food authority; which is not to say that the women are not authorities on food, but the man brings a sort of scientific, analytical view of food, one that is often dispassionate. He also plays a father figure and a series of lovers throughout. There is that male presence lurking in the shadows. It seems to say that however much women might try to make their world, discover and share their world with other women, there is, always the man or the world of men there, just within distance. So, while it is essentially a female play, I feel that it also speaks strongly to the men of our society in a number of ways – about women, about communication, about relationships.



## **INTERVIEW WITH DESIGNER: TRINA PARKER**

### ***What was your initial response as a designer to the text of "Salt"?***

I just loved it. As both a daughter and a mother myself, I just thought it was a beautifully written play; really human and funny. And because it involved a whole lot of things that women do in particular, it just immediately engaged me. I could understand it on every level; I felt like it was personally written for me, and I think everyone who sees it will feel the same.

My immediate response as a designer was, Oh my god, cooking in every act! What does that mean, how are we going to do it? Those thoughts were going through my head while, at the same time, really wanting to do the design for the play because I thought it was something worthwhile. I also thought it was something I knew about. Not so much as a cook - because, even though I can cook, I don't like it much - but as a person who spends a lot of time in the kitchen and who has been taught certain things by her mother. I started to think of some of the kitchen appliances mentioned in the play and memories immediately began to come to me about what happened in the past, and how that has influenced the way I operate in the kitchen. All that was interesting for me.

***The text makes specific references to quite a few things such as particular chefs, cookbooks, crockery designers, kitchen appliances and so on.***

***How much have you been able to rely on your own memory and how important has the research process been for the design of this particular production?***

Something for me that is always a challenge is: how specific do you get in relation to each object? How important is it that every cup that is picked up signifies the 60s era? And how much could that kind of specific detail actually detract from what the performers are doing and overtake the whole production? So, the first thing I did was research. For example, I researched on the Net and I read books about Susie Cooper who is the designer of the pottery in the play. I hadn't heard of her, but I had heard of Clarice Cliff (another pottery designer), so using her name, I began a search to find out what the pottery of the time looked like and so on. When it came to various other kitchen crockery and implements, part of it is memory and familiarity. After all I'm fifty, so I've lived through all the eras of the play, and I can remember certain things. On the other hand, when you go into the research you discover that there are a number of things we use in the kitchen that have been unchanged for thirty years. A potato peeler is a good example. Other things have been around for a long time but have changed shape over the years, such as the Kenwood Mixmaster we've got in this play. I had to research the Kenwood because we had a Sunbeam in my house.

I discovered a lot of things by looking through old magazines such as *The Women's Weekly* and *House and Garden*. Plastic handled scissors, for example, were actually advertised in *House and Garden* in the late 60s, but people's memories have got warped about what was around then. In rehearsal we all said "Oh no, plastic handled scissors didn't exist in the 60's", but there they were, being advertised. It's surprising the number of things that have changed very little in the last thirty years. Toasters are really similar, the basic old stainless steel toaster. Now we're starting to get a slight fashion emphasis, but most of the time, people have the same kitchen implements for ten or twenty years. There are very few households who don't have an accumulation of things that they've gathered over a period of time. So in a way, my intention for this play is for people not to become involved too much with the implements, but just to feel comfortable with them. Nothing really sticks out as being wrong. If someone gets a jug out of the fridge, it's just a glass jug; it feels familiar, it looks familiar and everybody senses that at some point in the last thirty years, they might have had one of those jugs in their kitchen.

On the other hand there are some things mentioned in the text about which we have to be absolutely specific. Through *The Trading Post* yesterday, we found a twenty five year old Kenwood in perfect working order, which we're not only using for the look in the show, (because it has to be brought out in its box), but also for its sound. The sound people want to record the sound of the Kenwood for the show. So, it's a balance always between what people would actually have had in their kitchens and what you do on stage to make the feeling right and for things to work practically, because in this play, they really have to cook.

***There are several different kitchens in the play. How have you designed the one space to portray the different kitchens?***

Well, that's the first problem. I'm a designer who likes things to be really simple, so I'm always trying to look for the simple solution. It's quite clear in this play that you can't change the set, unless you have a revolve with different kitchens set in different periods. In this play though, even if you had a million dollars, I think that would be inappropriate. The play is about two women at a kitchen bench. So the central "naturalistic" playing area remains as unspecific as possible. It's a wooden bench, and it sits on a cork floor. We would have had a timber floor, as that is something that has been around throughout the different eras. We couldn't tour with a timber floor however, so we've used cork, which is also something that doesn't specifically say 90's or 50's or 60's. It's also warm like timber, and the colour is important.

The table itself, in that central area where they do all the scenes, swivels to three different positions, so you do get a signifier that the women are actually working in different kitchens by the fact that the table is placed at a different angle to the rest of the set. The table also has drawers around it and the surface and the

handles on those drawers will come from different periods; for example laminex from the 50's and 70's drawer handles, so people will hopefully find a little bit of recognition.

The first decision was to make a central acting area that only changes very little, and the second was to provide the rest of the kitchen in black. This is a classic theatre decision, which says: this is no kitchen, or all kitchens. This black area of the kitchen means that the lighting can be concentrated in a central area but it also provides the actors with the practical spaces they need to play fairly naturalistically, because the play is very naturalistic in its playing, in some ways. It provides them physically with a cupboard door to open, a bench to put things on, a fridge door to open and so on, but it doesn't say anything specifically about period, so it will work well for all three periods. So, if the bench is at a particular angle, there's a Kenwood on it, and one of the actors happens to get a milk bottle out of the fridge, then that is about as much indication the audience will get about which period they are in, other than from the text. This avoids overstatement and keeps the concentration on the performance.

***You've talked about the particular challenge of going back and forth in time. The other obvious challenge in the play is the fact that the actors actually have to cook with real food on stage.***

***What has that meant for you as a designer and how has that challenge been met?***

The first thing I had to do was to find something that the actors can cook on, so I found a gas ring which I hope can be converted to LPG, so that we can actually put gas cylinders inside the bench. I spent a night in December with the playwright, and one of the actors who cooks, and we actually cooked every meal that they have to cook in the play. I timed how long they had the stove on as they cooked and that worked out to be a maximum of an hour, so that meant I could say we need gas cylinders to last an hour max. on stage. So that was important research. During that night, as we cooked all the recipes, I also documented every item of cooking equipment that she used. I just sat at the kitchen table, (we drank a lot of wine at the same time and ate the food that we cooked!) and I recorded every single thing that she did; for example, she took the salt, then she took a knife and so on. I wrote all of that down, and made a very comprehensive cost list early on. Then we looked in the Props Store and found as many substitutes or as many different kinds of cooking utensils and equipment that we could, and we put those in the rehearsal room. Since then, it's been a combination of the director, the stage manager, the actors and myself selecting what feels comfortable through the rehearsal process. We're now at a point two weeks into rehearsal, where we're able to specify exactly what kitchen props the actors are going to use. I've provided them, as the designer, with stuff and with spaces to put the stuff, but with very few other specific requirements. So if it's comfortable for an actor to get the olive oil off the shelf, that's her decision, not

mine. I've just said: here's some kitchen cupboards, you can take that particular item from wherever you like. Then the actors and the director have argued through what is logical and what isn't. So it's a combination of trial and error and what is comfortable for the performers, because they are the ones who have to do the cooking.

We're now just at the point where the actors need to have the stove on in the rehearsal room. They've worked everything out without the stove actually functioning; now they need to turn it on. They've had to work everything out with scripts in their hands, which has also been very difficult. It's very, very technically complex and it takes hours to rehearse one small section of the play: get the parsley from over there, bring it to here, cut it, and so on. The actor also has to work out and remember which particular cutting board or which knife they need to use in a particular scene, and that needs to be not only the knife the actor is comfortable with using, but also the kind of knife the character would use.

***Has the cooking in the show required that the set design remains flexible throughout the rehearsal period?***

Very much so. I would say any designer (within the constraints of allowing building time) would design in such a way as to allow some flexibility in the rehearsal process. When you design, you have to second guess what you think is going to happen in rehearsal and you're not always right. Already there are some small adjustments that we're making to what was initially designed. The other thing I should say is that in this case the table that the actors cook on and the cupboards that they use in the play have been built before rehearsal started and they've both been in the rehearsal room from day one. The actors could not possibly rehearse without those essential set items. Most rehearsal periods for other plays have some kind of substitute for the actual set, but in this case you can't substitute because it's so exacting.

***How have you gone about designing costumes for the various characters in "Salt", given that the play moves back and forth in time?***

This is a contemporary play. It is set last year and this year as well as in the 70's and the 80's, but I call that contemporary; we're not dealing with period costumes. The 70's are still easily within living memory.

I'm a designer who likes to find costumes in consultation with the actors. With some plays, you have to design the costumes way ahead and then they're drawn up and you present the costume drawings to the company. But if I possibly can, it's my personal preference not to say to the actors: here's a drawing of what you will be wearing. In this show, the amount of changing that they do and the time

that they've got to do it is quite a subtle thing, so there is a particular need for consultation with the cast.

In the rehearsal process, the next layer we're about to add is costume, so I've drawn up a plot which outlines each character and what they might be wearing in each period, and which talks about both the feel of the character and the mood and so on. I've researched the costume for each period, I've discussed preferences with the director, asking questions like: is this a woman who wears pants or a dress? Those sorts of questions. Now I'm about to meet with the actors and we're going to talk through what they think as well. And then we'll begin to add the costumes into the actual rehearsals. Some of those costumes will be sourced from the Playbox wardrobe, some will be bought and some, such as Laurel's dressing gown, might have to be made. We'll use trial costumes in rehearsal and then we may find that we have to dye something because the colour's not quite right or we might need to make something new. My preference for a play that is as naturalistic as this one is for clothes that are not wardrobe made, because they have a certain feel, a "used-ness" that is extremely difficult to achieve with newly made costume items that then have to be "broken down".

I also like to watch the actors in rehearsal and look at what they wear themselves and how comfortable they feel. There's a subtle balance between trying to make them look too much like somebody else and allowing them to be themselves, because the ages of the actors who are actually in this play are similar to the ages of the characters, and in some ways their experience is similar. The other big question is, if they can't change their hair and they're changing in age, how much or how little can you change their costume? If everything about the way one of the characters is dressed is suddenly 1970's, won't it look funny that, if she's supposed to be twenty years younger, she's still got grey hair? There is no time - and it would be inappropriate in a small theatre like this - to throw wigs on all the time to change their hair. Really, the moving back and forth in time in this play is about the women's relationship, not about fashion or history so I tend to lean to fairly subtle changes in costume and hair; you're not too distracted by strong fashion decisions but more by a subtle feeling that something has changed. That's a very difficult balance to achieve, and that's why rehearsal is so important - to try these things out. Designing the costumes is basically a process of research, then trial and hopefully not too much error, until opening night.

***The male actor plays a number of characters in the play . How have you designed his costume to fit these various roles?***

The two women and the centre of the set are kind of warm and glowy and quite naturalistic. Then as you move out to the edges of the space, the cupboards are black, so the obvious choice for the man is to wear black, because he is representing a number of different men, and he's a bit like the kitchen which

represents all kitchens - he represents all men. He plays a Spaniard, he plays the toxicologist, and so on. In terms of costume, he kind of belongs in the set around the edges; he enters the women's space every now and then, and then goes out. So I have dressed him in simple black trousers and shirt and and he may not change his costume much at all because, as you know, an actor can become a character without changing their costume. The other possibility is the man could be a memory. Even though the actors talk to him, he could be a memory, or something they've conjured up in their imagination. While he can act naturalistically, there needs to be a little bit of a stylistic removal, so hopefully the black costume will help with that.

***Can you talk about the collaborative process between the designer and both the director and the lighting designer?***

I'll talk about the lighting designer first, because in fact I had a meeting with the lighting designer before I met with the director on this play. The lighting designer, Rachel Burke, is another woman and, I think being women, there is a lot about this play that we feel really connected with. So I rang her up and said "Look, I've got some ideas and I really want to talk to you about them because they very directly involve lighting. That is, the lighting of the jars of fruit, the preserving jars". At that stage things were still mulling around in my head. I had met with the director once and we had talked a bit, but not much. I met with Rachel and we spent an hour and a half getting jars out of the pantry at her house and, using a torch, we shone it through the jars to test how that would look. Through that meeting, one of the strongest basic ideas in the set (which I won't talk about because it's part of the surprise) was developed and it was very strongly associated with the lighting design. It's not always like that; sometimes the lighting is introduced much later, but in this case, it seemed to be an intrinsic part of how we wanted to make the space work. From there we continued to negotiate because there is lighting incorporated into the shelves and in the fridge and the cupboard. It was important that, as I designed those shelves and so on, I talked to Rachel, because if the shelves weren't big enough to hold the lights, then the design was not going to work. Those are the sorts of practical things which have meant we've needed to consult pretty closely.

The collaboration with the director usually involves a series of meetings. I came up with the idea of how I thought the set could be. The director, Aubrey Mellor said "Yeah, that feels right" and then we refined it from there. The whole process seemed to move very fast. We talked and then I made the model and then we talked again, but it happened quite quickly because my first idea was something that the director liked and that is not always the case.

Throughout the rehearsal process we have been meeting and talking. We discuss what has happened that day or we plan for what might happen in the future; we talk about every aspect of the design and that is a collaboration that should continue all the way through. It's about negotiating each other's aesthetic,

each other's taste and sense of what the right choice for a colour or a shape or a piece of clothing might be. Negotiation is a big part of what the job is. We listen to each other's opinions and, once we've agreed on what we think a particular thing should be, then it's my job to go and find it.

Making good theatre is very hard. For the designer, it's not something that just stops when you finish the design. It's a process that continues from the day you first get the script until opening night. You don't ever rest, and you don't ever say "Well, that's done", because things develop and change. It's a creative process and that means it is continually developing and shifting. At the same time, it is extremely fascinating and challenging,.

## "Salt" by Peta Murray - Questions to Consider

1. Laurel and Meg represent women of two different generations.
  - describe how the generational differences are portrayed in the play.
  - do you feel that women's social and domestic roles as represented by the two characters have changed? How?
  - do you believe that mother-and-daughter relationships are any different now than they were 10,20 or 30 years ago?
2. "Salt" has often been described as a play about "women" but it could also be described as a play about "relationships". Do you believe there are elements common to all relationships that are evident in the play? Explain.
3. Do you feel this play has something to say to *all* members of the audience, not only women? Explain your answer.
4. The preparing, cooking and serving of food and its nurturing qualities are a central focus in "Salt".
  - How does food work as a *metaphor* in the play?
  - Can you think of any particular moments when the action with the food serves to highlight the dramatic action?
5. In her interview, playwright Peta Murray describes the character of The Man as an "ingredient". The character plays a number of roles and also serves a number of practical functions in the play.
  - What do you think these roles or functions are?
  - What does Peta Murray mean by "an ingredient"?
  - How crucial is the male actor to the action of the play?
  - Do you believe it would be as effective with only the two women on the stage? Explain.
6. The designer, Trina Parker, talks about designing a set, which can represent "all kitchens". How successful do you feel the design to be in allowing for smooth transformations in time and place?
7. Peta Murray describes the style of "Salt" as "magic realism". Aubrey Mellor, the director, describes "Salt" as "impressionistic". Both refer to both *naturalistic* and *non-naturalistic* elements/conventions in the play.
  - make a list of the naturalistic elements/conventions that are used in "Salt"
  - make a list of the non-naturalistic elements that occur in "Salt" (You could refer to acting, direction, set, costume, lighting, sound, make-up, props, dialogue, and movement in your answers).
  - how would you define "magic realism" and "impressionistic"?