

# THE SPOOK

---

MELISSA REEVES

## **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.

MALTHOUSE THEATRE PRESENTS

THE SPOOK EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE © MALTHOUSE THEATRE 2005

# THE SPOOK

**By Melissa Reeves**

## Education Notes



© Malthouse Theatre Education Program 2007

# The Spook

By Melissa Reeves

THE SPOOK EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE © MALTHOUSE THEATRE 2005

## EDUCATION NOTES

These education notes have been developed with the cooperation of the creative team that is bringing *The Spook* to the stage for Malthouse Theatre Season 1, 2007. They are by no means definitive but we hope they will be useful as a resource for those students and teachers studying the play. We encourage students to question the text and the performance in order to arrive at their own interpretations of particular moments and artistic choices.

---

CONTENTS	PAGE
Cast and Creative Team:	2
Pre-show considerations:	3
Background Information:	4
In conversation with:	
Melissa Reeves - Playwright	10
Tom Healey - Director	13
Anna Borghese - Set & Costume Designer	19
Richard Dinnen & David Franzke - Lighting and Sound Design`	23
Maria Theodorakis & Tony Nikolakopoulos - Actors	28
Questions for Analysis & Discussion	33
Activities for students	38
Resources	39

---

Meg Upton – Education Program Manager  
 Mark Doggett – Education Assistant  
 Malthouse Theatre  
 113 Sturt Street  
 Southbank 3006  
 Phone: 9685 5165  
 Fax: 9685 5112  
 Email: [education@malthousetheatre.com.au](mailto:education@malthousetheatre.com.au)  
 Web: [www.malthousetheatre.com.au](http://www.malthousetheatre.com.au)

©Malthouse Theatre Education 2007

# THE SPOOK

By Melissa Reeves

THE SPOOK EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE © MALTHOUSE THEATRE 2005

## Cast

Actor	Role
Luke Ryan	Martin
Allison Bell	Annette/ Policewoman/ Jean
Denis Moore	Alex
Kevin Harrington	Frank / Vincent
Margaret Mills	Trixi / Phyllis
Maria Theodorakis	Elli
Tony Nikolakopoulos	George

## Creatives & Crew

Melissa Reeves	Playwright
Tom Healey	Director
Anna Borghese	Set & Costume Design
Richard Dinnen	Lighting Design
David Franzke	Sound Design
Kirsten Marr	Stage Manager
Bonnie Walsh	Assistant SM

This production of *The Spook* was performed in the Merlyn Theatre at the CUB Malthouse, 16<sup>th</sup> February to 10<sup>th</sup> March, 2007

# THE SPOOK - Pre-show

*The Spook* is set in a very particular time and place: Australia in the 1960s, in the town of Bendigo. The play references this time very strongly in its language, objects and in its greater political and cultural context. Try to imagine what the historical, cultural and social climate was at the time...

Some things to consider before seeing the play:

**What does the term 'spook' mean?**

**What do you know about Australia in the 1960s?**

- Who was the Prime Minister when the play begins in 1964?
- Who was the Prime Minister when the play ends in 1968?
- Where is Bendigo and what do you know about it as a town?
- When was decimal currency introduced?
- What did people watch on television?
- What type of architecture, theatre, music and art was in fashion?
- What did people wear?
- What type of technology existed?
- What types of cars did people drive?
- What type of food and drink was consumed?
- What was the role of religion?
- Who or what is the DLP?
- Which countries and governments were our allies?
- Which were our perceived enemies?

**What do you know about the ideology known as 'Communism'?**

**What do you know about the following political figures:**

- Karl Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, Mao Tse Dong?
- Lyndon B Johnson, Senator Joseph McCarthy, J. Edgar Hoover?

**What do you know about ASIO?**

- What does the acronym ASIO stand for?
- What is ASIO's purpose?
- Does ASIO exist today?
- What are some equivalent organisations around the world?

**What do you know about The Cold War?**

- What is a 'cold' war?
- When was Hungary invaded by the USSR?
- When was Czechoslovakia invaded by the USSR?
- What impact did these events have on the world?

# Cold War

The **Cold War** was the period of conflict, tension and competition between the United States and the Soviet Union and their allies from the mid 1940s until the early 1990s. The main U.S. allies were Western Europe, Japan and Canada. The main Soviet allies were Eastern Europe and (until the Sino-Soviet split) China. Throughout the period, the rivalry between the two superpowers was played out in multiple arenas: military coalitions; ideology, psychology, and espionage; military, industrial, and technological developments; costly defense spending; a massive conventional and nuclear arms race; and many proxy wars.

In 1947 the term "Cold War" was introduced by Americans Bernard Baruch and Walter Lippmann to describe emerging tensions between the two former wartime allies. There never was a direct military engagement between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, but there was a half-century of military buildup, and political battles for support around the world, including significant involvement of allied and satellite nations.

Although the U.S. and the Soviet Union had been wartime allies against Nazi Germany, the two sides differed on how to reconstruct the postwar world even before the end of the Second World War. Over the following decades, the Cold War spread outside Europe to every region of the world, as the U.S. sought the "containment" of communism and forged numerous alliances to this end, particularly in Western Europe, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia.

There were repeated crises that threatened to escalate into world wars but never did, notably the Korean War (1950-1953), the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962), and the Vietnam War (1964-1975). There were also periods when tension was reduced as both sides sought *détente*. Direct military attacks on adversaries were deterred by the potential for massive destruction using deliverable nuclear weapons.

The Cold War drew to a close in the late 1980s following the launching of Mikhail Gorbachev's reform programs, *perestroika* and *glasnost*. The Soviet Union consequently ceded power over Eastern Europe and was dissolved in 1991.

## FAMOUS SPIES OF THE COLD WAR PERIOD.

**Kim Philby** (1912-1988), British intelligence officer and Soviet spy. As part of a spy ring that included Guy Burgess, Donald Maclean, and Anthony Blunt, Philby penetrated the upper levels of British intelligence and passed vital information to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) during the 1940s and 1950s.

Harold Adrian Russell Philby was born in Ambala, India, and educated at Westminster School and the University of Cambridge in England. At Cambridge, while studying history and economics, he met Burgess, Maclean, and Blunt; all four men became Communists and were recruited to spy for the USSR. Working

as a journalist during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), Philby submitted profascist newspaper reports, successfully creating a right-wing identity. Spanish dictator Francisco Franco personally presented him with a medal when Franco learned that Philby was the sole survivor of a car full of journalists that was destroyed by an artillery shell.

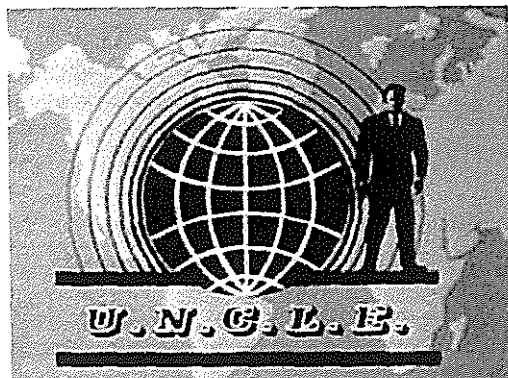
In 1940 Philby joined the British Secret Intelligence Service (commonly known as MI6), with the help of Burgess, who was already working there. By 1944 Philby was running MI6's new anti-Soviet section in London and passing information to Moscow. In 1946 he was made a member of the Order of the British Empire (OBE). In 1949 Philby became chief British intelligence representative in the United States, working with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the newly formed Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). From Washington he advised the Soviets in 1950 of a plan to send armed anti-Communist groups into Albania, assuring their defeat.

In 1951 he warned Burgess and Maclean that they were under suspicion, and they defected to the USSR. In the investigation that followed, Philby came under suspicion and was interrogated. He later resigned from the intelligence agency. From 1956 he worked as a journalist in Beirut, Lebanon. Based on information supplied by a defector from the Soviet spy agency, Philby was again interrogated in 1962. In 1963 he fled to the USSR, where he was granted political asylum and Soviet citizenship. He lived there until his death.

## SPIES ON TELEVISION

### THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E.

*The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* was an American television series that ran on NBC from September 22, 1964, to January 15, 1968, for 104 episodes (see 1964 in television and 1968 in television). The series centered on a two-man troubleshooting team for a covert espionage organization: American Napoleon Solo (Robert Vaughn), and Russian Illya Kuryakin (David McCallum). Leo G. Carroll played Alexander Waverly, the British head of the organization. The series, though fictional, achieved such notability as to have artifacts (props, costumes and documents, and a video clip) from the show included in the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library's exhibit on spies and counterspies. Similar exhibits can be found in the museums of the Central Intelligence Agency and other agencies and organizations involved with intelligence gathering.





# Communism

**Communism** is an ideology that seeks to establish a classless, stateless social organization, based upon common ownership of the means of production. It can be classified as a branch of the broader socialist movement. Early forms of human social organization have been described as 'primitive communism' by Marxists. However, communism as a political goal is generally a conjectured form of future social organization. There is a considerable variety of views among self-identified communists, including Maoism, Trotskyism, council communism, Luxemburgism, anarchist communism, Christian communism, and various currents of left communism, which are generally the more widespread varieties. However, various offshoots of the Soviet (what critics call the 'Stalinist') and Maoist interpretations of Marxism-Leninism comprise a particular branch of communism that has the distinction of having been the primary driving force for communism in world politics during most of the 20th century.

Karl Marx held that society could not be transformed from the capitalist mode of production to the advanced communist mode of production all at once, but required a transitional period which Marx described as the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat, the first stage of communism. The communist society Marx envisioned emerging from capitalism has never been implemented, and it remains theoretical; Marx, in fact, commented very little on what communist society would actually look like. However, the term 'Communism', especially when it is capitalized, is often used to refer to the political and economic regimes under communist parties that claimed to embody the dictatorship of the proletariat.

In the late 19th century, Marxist theories motivated socialist parties across Europe, although their policies later developed along the lines of "reforming" capitalism, rather than overthrowing it. The exception was the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party. One branch of this party, commonly known as the Bolsheviks and headed by Vladimir Lenin, succeeded in taking control of the country after the toppling of the Provisional Government in the Russian Revolution of 1917. In 1918, this party changed its name to the Communist Party, thus establishing the contemporary distinction between communism and other trends of socialism.

After the success of the October Revolution in Russia, many socialist parties in other countries became *communist parties*, signaling varying degrees of allegiance to the new Communist Party of the Soviet Union. After World War II, Communists consolidated power in Eastern Europe, and in 1949, the Communist Party of China (CPC) led by Mao Zedong established the People's Republic of China, which would later follow its own unique ideological path of communist development. Among the other countries in the Third World that adopted a pro-communist government at some point were Cuba, North Korea, North Vietnam, Laos, Angola, and Mozambique. By the early 1980s almost one-third of the world's population lived in Communist states. Since the early 1970s, the term "Eurocommunism" was used to refer to the policies of communist parties in western Europe, which sought to break with the tradition of uncritical and unconditional support of the Soviet Union. Such parties were politically active and electorally significant in Italy(PCI), France(PCF), and Spain(PCE).

There is a history of anti-communism in the United States, which manifested itself in the Sedition Act of 1918 and in the subsequent Palmer Raids, for example, as well as in the later period of McCarthyism. However, many regions of Latin America continue to have strong communist movements of various types. With the decline of the Communist governments in Eastern Europe from the late 1980s and the breakup of the Soviet Union on December 8, 1991, communism's influence has decreased dramatically in Europe. However, around a quarter of the world's population still lives in Communist states, mostly in the People's Republic of China

# AUSTRALIA IN THE 1960s

## 1960s – a thumbnail sketch

- **1962** - THE SPOOK EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE © MALTHOUSE THEATRE, 2005 Indigenous Australians gain the right to vote in all states except Queensland; Australia enters the Vietnam War
- **1964** - The Beatles tour Australia; 82 sailors die when HMAS Voyager sinks after being rammed by HMAS Melbourne; the editors of OZ magazine are charged with obscenity; PM Robert Menzies announces the reintroduction of compulsory military service for men 18-25
- **1965** - Indigenous Australians gain right to vote in state of Queensland
- **1966** - The ban on the employment of married women in the Commonwealth Public Service is lifted; Menzies retires as Australia's longest-serving Prime Minister and is succeeded by Harold Holt; Decimal Currency introduced.
- **1967** - large areas of Hobart and south-eastern Tasmania are devastated by bushfires on 7 February that kill 62 people; Prime Minister Holt drowns and is succeeded by John Gorton; Aboriginal Australians gain the right to citizenship after a referendum to allow the federal government to legislate for them is supported by over 90% of the population; Sydney is rocked by a series of brutal underworld killings; talkback radio is introduced; British comedian Tony Hancock commits suicide in Sydney; Gough Whitlam becomes leader of the Labor Party
- **1968** - Australia signs the nuclear non-proliferation treaty; Aboriginal boxing champion Lionel Rose defeats Masahiko "Fighting" Harada in Japan to become the world bantamweight champion; Australia's first liver transplant operation is performed in Sydney;
- **1969** - French conceptual artist Christo 'wraps' Little Bay in Sydney; renowned author-artists Norman Lindsay and May Gibbs die; the Australian production of the rock musical *Hair* premieres in Sydney; top pop groups The Easybeats and The Twilights break up; Tim Burstall directs *2000 Weeks*, the first all-Australian feature released since Charles Chauvel's *Jedda* in 1958

# Australian Security Intelligence Organisation

The Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) is the domestic security agency of Australia which is responsible for the protection of the country and its citizens from espionage, sabotage (especially sabotage of critical infrastructure), politically motivated violence, attacks on the Australian defence system, and acts of foreign interference.

ASIO is comparable to MI5, the domestic security agency of the United Kingdom. As with MI5 officers, ASIO officers have no police or arrest powers and are not armed, except in situations which may require a means of self-defence. ASIO operations requiring police powers are co-ordinated with the Australian Federal Police or with State and Territory police forces.

ASIO's sister organisation is the Australian Secret Intelligence Service (ASIS), which is the intelligence agency whose foreign counterparts are MI6 in the United Kingdom and the CIA in the United States. Although the responsibilities of ASIO and ASIS are complementary, they are separate agencies with distinct and different roles.

## ASIO 'OPERATIONS'

### The Case", 1950s

The operation to crack the Soviet spy ring in Canberra consumed much of the resources of ASIO during the 1950s. The operation became internally known as "The Case". MI5 assisted the then fledgling organisation with investigations concerning the spy ring. Among the prime suspects of the investigations were Wally Clayton, a prominent member of the Australian Communist Party, and two diplomats with the Department of External Affairs, Jim Hill and Ian Milner. However, no charges resulted from the investigations, because Australia had no laws against peacetime espionage at the time. "The Case" took a sensational turn in 1954 with the defection of the Third Secretary of the Soviet Embassy in Australia, in what has become known as "The Petrov Affair".

### The Petrov Affair, 1954

Vladimir Mikhailovich Petrov, Third Secretary of the Soviet Embassy in Australia and an agent of the Soviet Ministry of State Security (MVD, a forerunner to the KGB), had been subjected to several false accusations by the Soviet Ambassador that would have led to his imprisonment upon his return to the Soviet Union. Fearing for his safety, Petrov contacted Australian authorities.

ASIO was instrumental in arranging Petrov's defection to Australia, which occurred on 3 April 1954. Petrov was placed under protection, but his wife Evdokia was dramatically escorted to an awaiting aeroplane in Sydney by MVD agents. There was doubt as to whether she was leaving by choice or through coercion and so Australian authorities did not act to prevent her being bundled into the plane. However, when she later spoke to her husband via telephone it became clear that she was being forcibly repatriated to the Soviet Union and wished to defect alongside her husband.

When the aeroplane stopped for refuelling in Darwin, Northern Territory Police dramatically and sensationally stormed it and liberated Evdokia from her Soviet escort. The Soviet Union temporarily withdrew its Australian diplomatic mission in protest.

THE SPOOK EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE © MALTHOUSE THEATRE 2005

### **First Soviet Expulsion, 1961-63**

The First Secretary of the Soviet Embassy, Ivan Skripov, was ejected from Australia and declared *persona non grata* in 1963. Skripov had engaged in elaborate espionage preparations, which were detected and prevented by ASIO.

Since 1961 Skripov had been refining an Australian woman as an agent for Soviet intelligence. However, the woman was actually an undercover operative of ASIO. Skripov asked the woman to courier a package to Adelaide, where he said it would be accepted by a contact. ASIO allowed the woman's assignment to continue, hoping to uncover another arm of the Soviet intelligence apparatus in Australia.

The package contained a transmitter enabling coded messages to be sent by radio at several hundred words per minute. A similar device had been found in the United Kingdom after a British couple were arrested for spying for the Soviet Union. The package also contained a coded list of Russian transmission timetables.

However, the appointed contact did not show for the delivery and the ASIO operative was unable to deliver the package. Rather than take any more risks, ASIO recommended the ejection of Skripov and the government declared him *persona non grata* – not to be allowed re-entry into Australia.

## **THE AUSTRALIAN COMMUNIST PARTY**

### ***History***

The Communist Party was founded in Sydney in October 1920 by a group of socialists inspired by reports of the Russian Revolution. Among the party's founders were a prominent Sydney trade unionist, Jock Garden, Adela Pankhurst (daughter of the British suffragist Emmeline Pankhurst) and most of the then illegal Australian section of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). In its early years, the party achieved some influence in the trade union movement in New South Wales, but by the mid 1920s it had dwindled to an insignificant sect.

In the later 1920s the party was rebuilt by Jack Kavanagh, an experienced Canadian Communist activist, and Esmonde Higgins, a talented Melbourne journalist. But in 1929 the party leadership fell into disfavour with the Comintern, which under orders from Stalin had taken a turn to extreme revolutionary rhetoric (the so-called "Third Period"), and an emissary, the American Communist Harry Wicks, was sent to correct the party's perceived errors. Kavanagh was expelled and Higgins resigned.

During the 1930s The party began to win positions in trade unions such as the Miners Federation and the Waterside Workers Federation, although its parliamentary candidates nearly always polled poorly at elections.

During the early stages of World War II the party was banned, but after the Soviet Union entered the war the party had a brief period of popularity. Its membership rose to 20,000, it won control of a number of important trade unions, and a Communist candidate, Fred Paterson, was elected to the Queensland parliament. But the party remained marginal to the Australian political mainstream. The Australian Labor Party remained the dominant party of the Australian working class, and always refused to enter alliances with the Communists.

After 1945 and the onset of the Cold War, the party entered a steady decline. The CPA launched an industrial offensive in 1947, culminating in a prolonged strike in the coalmines in 1949. The Chifley Labor government saw this as a Communist challenge to its position in the labour movement, and used the army to break the strike. The Communist Party never again held such a strong position in the union movement.

In 1951 the Menzies conservative government tried to ban the party, first by legislation that was declared invalid by the High Court, then by referendum to try to overcome the constitutional obstacles to that legislation, but the referendum was narrowly defeated. When Stalin died and Nikita Khrushchev revealed his crimes in the Secret Speech, members began to leave. More left after the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956.

By the 1960s the party's membership had fallen to around 5,000, but it continued to hold positions in a number of trade unions, and it was also influential in the various protest movements of the period, especially the movement against the Vietnam War. But the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 triggered another crisis. Their party leader, Laurie Aarons, denounced the invasion, causing a group of pro-Soviet hardliners to leave and form a new party, the Socialist Party of Australia. Through the 1970s and 1980s the party continued to decline, and by 1990 its membership had declined to less than a thousand.

In 1991 the Communist Party was dissolved and the New Left Party formed. The New Left Party was intended to be a broader party which would attract a wider range of members. This did not happen, and the New Left Party was disbanded in 1992. The Communist Party's assets were thereafter directed into a body called the SEARCH Foundation.

In 1996 the Socialist Party took up the now-unused name of Communist Party of Australia (see Communist Party of Australia (revived)). This party, along with a number of small Trotskyist groups, maintains the Communist tradition in Australia.

[Sources: The information above has been sourced from [www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com) and is edited to create an overview for the purposes of these notes. It is by no means exhaustive. Please go to the website for more information].

## IN CONVERSATION WITH MELISSA REEVES, PLAYWRIGHT OF *THE SPOOK*

---

*Melissa, what prompted you to write *The Spook*?* THE SPOOK EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE © WALTHOUSE THEATRE 2005

I read an newspaper article in the early nineties which told the story of a man who at nineteen years of age had been recruited by ASIO in the mid 1960s in Bendigo, and had, at their instigation, joined the local Communist Party Branch, and reported back on their activities to ASIO for the next twenty two years. In the article he was looking back on his life and wondering just what it was all for. I was very taken with his story. I loved the humour of it, the notion of someone devoting their life to spying on a country town branch of the Communist Party seemed ludicrous in the extreme, as did the ambitions of the spy agency that recruited him and sent him there. But there is also such a poignant, tragic side to it, the course of a man's life so altered by a heedless decision he made before he turned twenty, to say yes to something that sounded important and exciting, but was ultimately ugly and pointless. When I researched what I could find out about the back-ground to it, the machinations of ASIO in the 1960's, I discovered that his was not an isolated case, it was just one of the few that has surfaced. ASIO had recruited hundred's of 'sparrows' all over Australia to infiltrate the Communist Party, even into the sixties and seventies, when the Communist Party was losing strength and beginning it's slow decline in the wake of revelations about Stalin, and ongoing disillusionment with the Soviet Union.

*You have been described as a 'political playwright'. How do you respond to this?*

I absolutely embrace the definition. Many of the playwrights I most admire both now and historically are political playwrights. I want to write plays that struggle with the momentous events of the present, re-examine and illuminate the past, and that challenge the prevailing orthodoxy where it seems wanting.

*What aspects of *The Spook* would you consider to be political?*

I think it is political in that it explores the damage done to peoples lives by the heedless, over-blown actions of a Security Organisation such as ASIO in Australia in the 1960's. During the Cold War, Australian Communists were identified as a threat to democracy, even though their activities in Australia were largely about local issues, such as workers rights, refugees, and indigenous rights. The other life that is of course damaged in my play is that of their own recruit to the cause – Martin. I hope that although *The Spook* is a historical piece, the ideas it explores resonate in our own time, which, similar to the 1960s has its own climate of fear.

*How would you describe the style of this particular play?*

I would describe the style as tragi/comedy.

*The play was first performed by Company B Belvoir in 2004/2005. Other than as playwright, did you have a role in that production? For example, did you spend any time in the rehearsal room?*

Yes, I spent a lot of time in the rehearsal room. As this was its first production, the first ever rehearsal has so many unknowns. Questions were addressed such as what performance style will best suit the play? Should there be any major changes to

take on the meaning of various scenes, and the unfolding of the story. I felt very welcome in the rehearsal room. In fact during my play writing life, I have always felt welcome in the rehearsal room, and it's one of my favourite parts in the process, watching the actors and directors work. You sometimes have to bite your tongue. The play has been yours for months and now it has become collaborative, and the director and the actors will bring their own stamp to the work. But I see the writer of a new work as an intrinsic part of the 'sculpting' of the work.

***When you wrote the play did you envisage a particular design for the play? If so, how have the actual design(s) reflected your own ideas?***

I don't really envisage a design. Sometimes I see my characters in real settings, sometimes I see them on a stage. I let my mind wander where it will.

***Theatre Studies students are asked to explore the role of a dramaturge in a play production. Did you or have you worked with a dramaturge and what has this process been?***

With *The Spook*, I took the play to first/second draft without a dramaturge, and then I applied to the Australian Playwrights Conference which is a national two week workshop/showing where about eight playwrights have the chance to work with a Director, a Dramaturge, and a terrific cast. This was hugely valuable and the play changed shape enormously. An early scene was cut entirely from the play. Two large scenes which began the second act were put on the end of the first act, which meant I needed to create new plot and write it up in a number of scenes for the second half. The structure of the two weeks, with every second day off for writing and then back to the group to discuss the results means you work quite fast, and it moves the play along very quickly. Then in the run-up to the Company B production, the director, (Neil Armfield) took the role of Dramaturge, and we made further changes. Even on this new production Tom Healy (the director) and I are discussing possible changes in the text.

***As well as telling the story of the protagonist, Martin, did you want your play to explore any particular themes?***

The major theme was the one I alluded to earlier – the damage that can be done in peoples lives by an unfettered and zealous security organisation, and how it is sometimes in the interests of Governments and organisations to demonise groups of people in society. Another theme that emerged as I wrote the play was how these two influential organisations of the sixties when the play is set, The Communist Party, and ASIO, while embodying very apposed ideals, were each a sort of mirror image of the other. For example, in my research, I discovered the existence of a disciplinary body within the Communist Party called the Control Commission which had odd echoes with the actions of ASIO.

***What in particular has drawn you to the process of playwriting – why plays and not novels, poetry or non-fiction?***

At school in NSW, I used to go to the theatre in Canberra and fell in love with it. I used to devour the magazine of the time *Theatre Australia* which talked about Australian actors, directors, productions and fabulous writers like John Romeril and Dorothy Hewitt. In the mid seventies, Australian Theatre was undergoing a renaissance and it sounded a very alluring place to be. I trained as an actor at

Flinders University of South Australia, and worked as an actor for ten years, after which writing plays seemed a natural and desirable development.

***What do you see as being the role of Australian Playwrights in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?***

THE SPOOK EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE © MALTHOUSE THEATRE 2005

Our role is to keep on working, keep on writing and find places to put our work on. The number of Australian plays produced by the major companies has dropped alarmingly over the last ten years. We must re-claim the stages.



## IN CONVERSATION WITH TOM HEALEY, DIRECTOR OF *THE SPOOK*

---

**Tom, what initially attracted you to the role of directing *The Spook*?**

Well, I have a long standing relationship with Melissa Reeves, the writer. I also trained as an actor and one of my earliest jobs was in a musical play about Mary McKillop called *Storming Heaven* that Melissa Reeves wrote for the Red Shed in South Australia. That was in 1996 and since then I've worked on a commission of a play entitled *The Salt Creek Murders* by Melissa Reeves from the beginning, through the development stage to the final production. That particular play toured Victoria and South Australia.

I attended the national Playwrights' Conference in 1999 which was chaired by Marian Potts and *The Spook* was one of the selected plays. At the time I was working as the Artistic Associate for Playbox Theatre, the predecessor to the Malthouse Theatre, and had been working towards having a play by Melissa produced. I had had a conversation with Melissa around that time in relation what she had available and she said that she had just read an article about a man who had spied for ASIO in Bendigo but that it was just an idea at present. I thought that the idea sounded fantastic. So, when I attended the Playwrights' Conference in 1999, there was the first draft - tremendously funny, very black and quite wonderful. I came back to Playbox, spoke to the Artistic Director Aubrey Mellor and said that we should try and produce this play.

However, as is usual at the Conference there was a flurry of interest and Belvoir Street got the national performing rights. They were intending to tour the play to Victoria so that meant we couldn't produce it. I then thought that it wouldn't happen. I had spoken to Michael Kantor about *The Spook* when he started at Malthouse Theatre and then last year I received a phone call saying that they had programmed it and would I direct it. So I have had a history with the play in that regard.

***Would you talk about your process in the rehearsal room in relation to bringing the play to the stage.***

It's a very narrative driven piece. It's got seven actors and about sixteen characters and the style of the writing is very non-psychological. It's also very character-driven so at the moment we are throwing every scene up on the floor quite quickly and asking, 'What has to happen in this scene?' Rather than investigating deep psychological motivation or big emotional stuff as you would in a more spiritually or psychologically driven piece, the process is more practical. At present we are exploring how we stage a meeting, and how we find the tension and narrative shape of the piece. We are working very quickly and quite pragmatically.

***As a director, how have you worked with the actors in rehearsals to help develop their characters? What processes have you undertaken or are you planning to undertake?***

A central question in regard to doing the play is – what is its style? It is a comedy but it also has a serious undertone. It contains a quite dark metaphoric story about surveillance and betrayal, truth and lies, as well as having a ridiculous and quite daffy comic level. In the rehearsal room we are looking at how each scene functions and contributes to the narrative or to the overall story. For instance we may say, in this

scene Martin has to be discovered but not. Then, we ask; how does each character function to make that moment work? We are also asking questions such as; what sort of person is this, and what kind of behaviour do we need them to exhibit? It is a process of working from the outside in. This type of process is related to mask work, or commedia dell'arte or even the European clown tradition rather than the American method of acting where you start from neutral and then dig down inside. We may need a really big argument to happen at a particular moment so we ask ourselves, how do we make that happen and how does it then play into the whole building of the character through the piece?

So the characters are being built, not as separate from the piece, but as the piece is being built on the floor. We are about halfway through Act Two now so each day the characters are becoming stronger. The actors then can say; 'So I do this in this scene, this in that scene, and then put them together and it means this'. This is a process that allows us to work quickly rather than spending hours talking about or wondering about what it means. The characters then become the sum of all those things that need to happen.

***It sounds as if your approach is one of allowing the piece to influence the characters?***

Absolutely, it is the sort of writing where you have to do that. If you start papering over the cracks or introducing character invention that is unnecessary to the plot, then the narrative collapses. It isn't the sort of play that needs a layer of invention across it. It requires strong and clear interpretation.

***The play is set in regional Victoria in the 1960s. How is this period reflected in the production?***

Historically the sensibility of the play couldn't exist in a later decade. The play is set around the events of the Cold War and also the time of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. These are very particular events that form major plot points. More importantly, the play is set in a time where the social mores are so different from the 21<sup>st</sup> century and they play a critical part in the play. I think the script takes a romantic view of that 1960s period in some ways and it is a view of that period that we are being flexible with – we're not slavishly adhering to it in rehearsal.

In rehearsal we've been talking about the idea that in the 1960s, the world was a much simpler place, particularly in a technical sense. In the 1960s we have a world where there are no mobile phones, no answering machines. If you want to organise a dinner party or meeting you have to write letters or notes, or go and physically find those people and organise it. The fast paced communication that we use now is absolutely missing from this play and that is fundamental to the telling of this story. If the characters have mobile phones, answering machines or email, then the particular obstacles and problems in this play wouldn't exist, they would be quite different.

I also think that the 1960s was a very particular time for Australia as a country. It was nearing the end of Robert Menzies' leadership, just before Whitlam was elected in 1972, and the political conscience of Australia was in a quite different place. It was pre-drought, pre-globalization, pre-international connection and the play is also set in a country town, Bendigo. This means that you can achieve a microcosm of Australia before it really *internationalized* in the 1970s with Whitlam, Fraser, China and the political journey subsequent to that. You could describe it as a backwater but it is also suggested in the play that Bendigo is an idyllic place. There are two Greek characters who have escaped the civil war in Greece and have come to Bendigo

because it's a quiet and safe place. It isn't hick country but a place where these people can escape the hurly burly of what is happening in Europe.

Melissa has chosen this point in history quite particularly I think because it is a moment where you can say that this is a point from where Australia made a range of choices we are now inheriting. The play deals with a time before we entered the regional Pacific and international political world. We were still an outpost of Britain and people led, at a conscious level, mostly happy and simple lives. The contrast to that is the US belief that Communism was evil and the 'Reds under the bed' concept began to gain momentum. Therefore, this bunch of local Communists has implications for the social fabric. The idea of being a Communist in this time was terrible.

***The script shifts location and time quite rapidly. Has this affected the way in which you have directed the play? Has it created any issues for you?***

I think that Melissa has either consciously or unconsciously written a play that in some ways stylistically reflects the theatre of its time. I mean this in the sense that while it doesn't imply a box set, it doesn't lend itself to a high concept, abstract setting. Yet, it has a rhythm or structure where you can't stop every five minutes for a four minute scene change. The designer, Anna Borghese, and myself have had to come up with a playing space that is flexible enough to become sixteen different locations as well as have enough specific elements in it so that an audience can respond or recognise aspects such as 'that house', or 'that room'. So we've created a shell containing two principal locations that are two different houses, splitting the stage in two. One half has a more modern late 1960s finish and the other half has a 1930s or 1940s workers' cottage finish. We're suggesting two different kinds of houses from the same period. The idea is that we then focus on particular elements depending on where we want to be.

The other thing to remember is that the locations are fairly much written into the spoken text. We don't have to do large set changes to indicate that. But it is a great challenge because we could add twenty minutes to the performance time if we did all the changes that the locations suggest. It is tricky, but so far in the rehearsal room the solutions seem to be working. We have also deliberately theatricalised the space so that even though it has a lot of naturalistic elements you can see the theatre behind it – the lights, the mechanisations – and a back fly that lifts to reveal an abstract cloud space. Quite regularly throughout the production we're referencing the show's own theatricality. My hope with that is that we relieve any pressure on the audience to believe in the reality of the houses and locations by allowing them to acknowledge its theatricality.

***Have you made any changes to the current script and, if so, what have those changes been?***

Fortunately the playwright lives in Melbourne so she has spent quite some time in rehearsal and will continue to do so. Between the play's first production - which was at Belvoir Street Theatre in Sydney - and now, Melissa was contracted to produce a version of the play for radio so she has already re-jigged and edited the play. The new version is slightly different to the printed script and we have fiddled with that in very small ways. We haven't made any big narrative or plot changes.

The biggest change we've made is with the end of the play. We've brought the ending to a more thunderous conclusion than it has in the printed version. I felt very strongly that Martin, the central character, is a type of siphon for Australia in some

ways and by a series of very well-meaning, muddling mistakes he manages to get this Greek character, of whom he is very fond, deported and possibly killed. I felt I wanted him to pay for that more than he did in the original version, that it needed to be brought closer to him and he needed to process it more thoroughly. So the biggest change that we've made – and we talked about it for a couple of months – is how we could make that last scene mean more in terms of its metaphorical implications. It does have strong links with a contemporary Australia. The whole idea of right wing politics, spying and surveillance is very much part of our lives now, so I didn't want Martin to escape quite as easily as he does in the original version.

***Do you think that the play explores any particular themes or ideas and what do you consider these to be?***

The play explores a number of ideas but at a metaphoric level, beyond the story telling, it explores truth and lies and what individual responsibility means. So at the beginning of the play Martin, a good Irish Catholic working class boy, is approached by ASIO to 'serve' his country and of course he becomes all starry eyed and enthusiastic and takes on the task with some zeal and vigour. In the course of the play he discovers that one of the members of the local Communist Party is living in Australia under a false name and is a political refugee from Greece. He passes that information onto ASIO and the Greek character, George, is arrested and deported.

The metaphor for that I think is that we have a history of seeing ourselves as 'innocent' or as 'innocents'. It is a tradition that's imbedded in the Anzac myth. If you look at the film of *Gallipoli* we're depicted as young, good looking and free spirited Aussie blokes who just want to do the right thing then the English betray us, we end up dying and it's not our fault. There is a strong thread in Australian culture where we believe that 'it's not our fault'. I think this is reflected in the media now where it seems that the war in Iraq is all George Bush's fault and that John Howard is just Bush's lap dog. America is making us go and it's Big Bad George's fault. I think for us to accept our own decisions would mean that, at this moment in time we are a war-faring nation. We are at war with Iraq, if not with the whole of Islam. I think that *The Spook* gets right to the meat of that and asks the question – What is it about us as Australians that we tend to think we are just the little cousin of someone bigger (it used to be England and now it's America) but we don't own what we do?

There are a lot of large political issues we need to face at the moment - for example the Kyoto protocol, global warming in general, and certainly the treatment of refugees. There are a large group of people in this country saying that we are responsible for these things and even larger group who are denying this and saying it isn't our fault, it's an international situation and we're following the leader. Thematically this play hits hard into that territory. It doesn't do it by tackling those issues directly, instead it creates a character that expresses the naïve, gentle backwater of Australia and its politics. That character is Martin and he characterises the way that we saw ourselves then and prefer to remember ourselves quite fondly as being. I think that the character of Martin embodies that and then is the betrayer and the play brings us face to face with that.

***How would you describe the style of The Spook?***

It's a comedy. It's character driven. It has elements of clown in it. I suppose the closest description I have is that it's a combination of genres. It references thrillers, political satire, Buffon clown and, in some ways it's a kind of political epic as well, but it really just references them. It pulls them in to make a particular scene resonate. At the centre it's a character-driven comedy.

***Tom, have you had any input in relation to the design of the production?***

Yes. This is the third production that Anna Borghese, the designer, and I have worked on and our process is very consultative. My process in relation to direction and design begins with the script. I read the script and I make a list of things that have to happen. For *The Spook* must be there. For example, we can't do *The Spook* without some sense of Martin's house - we need a door for that moment, we need a window for that moment, a radiogram etc. So I look at the script with some sense of what we needed to have and I began discussions from that point. Anna tends to come in from the other way, a larger concept of the world of the play; its flavour, its period, size of space. So I treated it as a combination where I brought the nuts and bolts to the collaboration – what we really have to have - and we start from there.

The design process has been very long and quite difficult because of its challenges. The other two productions we've worked on together were quite abstract in nature and concept. Anna and I have been challenging each other all the way through and, therefore, the design is very much collaborative and I think Anna would agree. In the end, I have no idea how to solve the visual issues that Anna can do so well, but I certainly had input into how it would look.

***Do you think that the director of the production is the final lens through which the audience views the work?***

I think that depends very much on the director and the style of the piece. There's a style of theatre at present which is very big in continental Europe, and gaining currency here in Australia, and one of which I am very fond – in the style of the work of Barry Kosky, Michael Kantor, and Benedict Andrews. I call it 'high concept' theatre. It places the director at the centre of the action, the director as sculptor and designer of a performance. What is important about the director in regard to this type of theatre is that it concerns the particular *take* on the work. For instance, when Barry Kosky did *King Lear*, it became known as 'Kosky's Lear' because it really was his take on it. There was no pretence on his part to be creating any kind of neutral view of the play or replication.

*The Spook* doesn't lend itself to that type of production. This is a play where I, as a director, need to get underneath the work and unpeel as much of the covering as I can so that it is as clear as possible. I see my task as a director of this play as being as faithful as possible to what the playwright has written.

Of course director's make choices in regard to who is fore-grounded, who is backgrounded, what characters have what power in the space. So a director can control that and you would be silly to argue that wasn't the case. But, if you consider this in the wider theatrical landscape, this is a production where the director has much less obvious creation of the lens. Certainly my aim is to create a production that is as true to Melissa's view of this story as I can make it. I'm hoping that there won't be too much of me in there. There will be something of me but certainly not the type of visible presence that directors can have in other styles of work.

***What do you see as the role of theatre in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?***

I think the essential quality of theatre is that it brings a group of people together in the same space to experience something. What is experienced – the story, the play – is a constantly changing thing. It depends on fashion, on zeitgeist, on what country, time and place. These elements are in flux. In every single culture from stone age, as far as we know, people have gathered in urban, regional, large, small community

and contemporary environments to experience something in each others' company. That's where theatre and film differ as mediums. They don't threaten each other because what you experience in theatre is a sense of community with the people who are performing for you and in front of you as well as with the audience that is sharing that experience.

THE SPOOK EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE © MALTHOUSE THEATRE 2005

The great thing about theatre is that each performance is unique. Every performance has its intrinsic differences – different make-up, actors' moods, faster, slower. It is a very individual and un-repeatable experience. It is a very atavistic gathering of the clan or tribe. I think that theatre is becoming more like that – the gathering of the clans. It is a particular feature of the live music scene in the last twenty-five years. You can buy a CD of a band, then go and see them live and it will mean something completely different and you will have a very personal experience.

If you had asked me this question ten years ago before the turn of the century I would have said that I think theatre is going to go high-tech and create high illusion. Actually, I think its role has become more strongly aligned with the fact that we do lack community in our society, we lack places to gather, and that's partly because we have largely abandoned the Church. So, our places to meet and assemble are becoming more and more important. I think, therefore, the role of theatre in this century somehow has to become a temple for that type of gathering.

## INTERVIEW WITH ANNA BORGHESE, DESIGNER OF *THE SPOOK*

---

**Anna, as a designer what were your first impressions when you read the script of *The Spook*?**

My first impressions were that it was a pretty simple play but dealing with fairly large universal themes. For me the drama felt almost kitchen-sink-like (and I'm not saying that this limits it). It had an intimate, domestic feel which was really important in terms of where we needed to go with the design for the play. Having said that the play also speaks to big ideas and big universal themes so I felt it was important to allow the drama to reveal those things in a design environment that actually supported that.

***Some of the stage directions at the beginning of the play script are quite specific. Have these been influential in any way?***

Part of the challenge for the director, Tom Healey, and I was coming up with an environment that supported the story rather than overwhelmed it with bigger ideas. In terms of that process we did actually start very big, almost at opera size, and then we did bring it back down to a more domestic environment. That was important part of our process. In order to find what the key design elements were we needed to go outside the text and explore the sub text, explore the bigger themes. What I then needed to do as a designer was give these some visual strength. I constructed a model in response to the big ideas and we then worked from that model down to what became a very domestic environment.

We have ended up with two halves of two homes. *The Spook* is predominantly an interior play. We have four scenes where it goes into an exterior or larger world and that exterior design relates strongly to a political theme that runs throughout the play. We've chosen those moments within the play to exist in a much bigger world so there is a very big scene change when we go into that outside environment. The back wall of the set goes up and exposes the sky cloth. This becomes the 'opera' moment of the play. The play travels between the intimacy of an internal, domestic world into the greater world however, it is important that the bigger world doesn't dominate the play.

***Would you briefly describe your set design process.***

I approach each play I design in quite particular ways. The way I approached *The Spook* was by reading the text at least six times before I even put pen to paper. I found the characters to be, on one level, quite simple in terms of who they actually are yet they are quite complex in regard to what their journey is.

Because the actors play double roles it was very important to approach the design of this play with an understanding of who plays which roles and where these characters might enter and exit so that we can incorporate the quick changes. Even though those aspects shouldn't necessarily determine the design you have to be conscious of them because, ultimately, they have to work within the design.

So, I read the script many times, roughed up a model and then presented it. Interestingly, Tom Healey was in Sydney working for much of my early design process. We spoke on the phone but didn't actually get together until six weeks before the design deadline so I presented a couple of options. We then worked

intensely eliminating and then adding back into the design. We probably worked through four set models in order to arrive at the current design. So, that was the process for this particular play.

***The play moves between settings and places. How has this aspect of the play been incorporated into the set design? Does it limit or open up possibilities?***

The space is a fairly fixed space, although there is one major change where the back wall flies out. Apart from there is very little movement of the set except for actors and props. I think this is very important because the play is so busy so it is vital that the busyness comes from the drama rather than the drama being the scene changes. So the choice has been to limit the set changes but, having said that, we accommodate all the necessary locations within the fixed space. Many of the scenes are interior scenes so we are able to achieve that within the design.

***Would you talk about the Merlyn Theatre. What challenges and possibilities has that particular space offered you as a designer?***

Putting the show into the Merlyn has been a difficult challenge. Originally the play was going into the Beckett Theatre and in terms of the intimacy of the piece it is very appropriate for that smaller space, but, in terms of what needs to be achieved in terms of location and quick changes means that the Merlyn is actually more appropriate.

Having moved the play into the Merlyn is, as I said, a challenge. The Merlyn is such a large space and it was really important that we didn't lose the audience. We want the audience to feel very close to the action and we want the audience to be really drawn into the piece so they feel they are in the lounge room with the characters. So it was a matter of using the full width of the theatre – a very wide space – and constructing a false proscenium. In some ways a proscenium can push an audience away from the action. In this case we have tilted the proscenium to bring the audience back in under it. The idea is that we want to suck the audience in towards the actors. The angle of the floor is designed to thrust the actors back out towards the audience.

***Is the stage floor raked?***

It's not raked. We didn't put in a rake because we have to consider the budget. Because we have a fairly large cast and a lot of costumes, it was important to achieve a balance between the costumes, the wigs and the sets. There is no point having an elaborate set that facilitates everything that the production requires in terms of environment and then not having resources to put into wardrobe. The other thing with a rake is that the Merlyn is very well raked so raking the playing space wasn't essential. There are levels within the set but they remain consistent, they don't actually rake.

***The Spook takes place in a very particular time in history. What research have you conducted in relation to the play?***

In relation to the 1960s, one of the key things to consider is that the play is set in Bendigo. The important thing to remember is that Bendigo in that decade is a very different place to Melbourne. It is a rural regional town, more isolated, probably only receiving two television channels – Channel 2 and one of the commercial stations - magazine deliveries all would have been later. It was important to respect that and not impose too much of a sophisticated city notion onto those characters. If the play



was designed like that it would reduce the believability of the characters and because what happens is so extraordinary, to put that in the city would have made it less believable. In terms of the set dressings we have chosen two different styles of houses. Elli and George's place, the Greek couple who arrived in Bendigo six years previously is one of those houses. Then there is the house of Trixi, Annette and Martin who are the spook, more a representation of Mount Australia of the time and Australian thinking at the time. The houses reflect that time and period and those characters.

That thinking has also impacted on the costumes and props. They very much reflect the time and place. We really wanted the hair styles of the period and the wigs assist with this as well as allowing the women to make quick character changes. At this stage we have about 12 wigs in the show which is quite substantial for a production. This design choice involves another practical element for the actors where they actually have to familiarise themselves with the process of putting on a wig. They can't just come in at the half hour call, put on a bit of makeup, do a voice warm up and walk on. They have to allow enough time to become that first character, then check that the requirements for their other character are backstage. It is a much more elaborate process.

***You spoke earlier about how the design highlights the intimate interior world versus the vast exterior international world. Would you elaborate on this?***

I would say that the play addresses the politics of the time; an Australia that was naïve, unquestioning, and embracing. Then with the introduction of an element like the spook or spy suddenly we become suspicious, questioning, a different world. There are lots of parallels in terms of contemporary feelings about minority groups. I haven't deliberately addressed those themes in the design because I think they are so clear within the play so to emphasise that, particularly in the design would be to almost become didactic. I felt it was important for those ideas to speak by themselves to a certain extent.

Within the set there are references to the politics. The set looks at the new and the old. Half of the set is a house that speaks to the 1960s, the actual modernity of that. The other house is more like workers' cottage in Bendigo, so the two ideas are there. I think it is important thematically that one half of the design is particularly British in its interior and the other house has more of a European influence. In some ways I have addressed this difference but not wanted to over emphasise it. The characters in the play aren't sophisticated people. They aren't worldly, they're quite simple and express the rural-ness of their world.

***As part of your research did you visit Bendigo?***

Yes, I've been several times. I didn't visit Bendigo in specific reference to *The Spook*, because I've been living in the country for the last few months and have done the design in that rural environment with some country sensibility.

***Does the casting of certain actors influence the costume design?***

Yes it always does. I think it's really important for the actors to be involved in the decision-making process with costume. In a play such as *The Spook* where there are so many quick changes and such a broad range of characters operating within such a tight framework, it is very important to work with the actors. They bring to me in a wardrobe fitting items from the rehearsal room that I'm not aware of. I have to incorporate that. I can't say that they must wear the costume I've decided if it isn't

going to work with the action on stage and the quick changes they have to make. So, I've worked closely with the actors in that regard and then, of course, their own physicality informs the style of the costume. Then there are the boundaries of the era – 1964 to 1967. It's a slightly treacherous process for the wardrobe department because it makes it very difficult to pre-plan but I think it's a more effective way of costuming before the shows goes into a technical run. It means that by the time the technical time begins you have hopefully solved certain practical and artistic issues. There isn't any point in designing a costume without considering the actor – unless it's a bear suit!

***What theatrical style would you attribute to The Spook?***

It's theatrical and fairly heightened in its overall style. We encourage the audience to believe that they really are in the lounge rooms of these characters and then we remove the back wall, light up the sky cloth and remind them that they are actually in the theatre. We refer very strongly to the notion of meta-theatre and we state quite strongly; here are the bells, here are the whistles, here are the wires, this is how it all works. We then put the wall back down and state now that's all gone and we're returning to our conventional theatre style.

Stylistically it's a clash between a quite realistic, conservative theatrical style and an exploration of the notion of meta-theatre where you are telling your audience that they are, after all, just in a theatre seeing a play and being told a story and we're showing them how it all works. I think this is a stylistic choice we have imposed on the production because it's not something that's written into the stage directions. It was a solution that Tom and I found to bringing the outside world into this very intimate odd interior domestic drama. It revealed itself in the writing that it could do that because the scenes that happen in the park between Martin and Alex are of the bigger world – spying, espionage and even the surreal. Even though what they doing between themselves is very quiet and secretive, the notion of putting them in a vast space because they became very small figures in a very big landscape. Whereas the other characters, when they are in the interior scenes, are very large characters in quite confined spaces.

***Have you collaborated with the other artists in the creative team?***

Working with Richard Dinnen, lighting, and David Franzke, sound, is important. There is some practical lighting on the set which means I have to ensure that where prac lights need to hang works within the overall lighting design. With sound, there is always an awareness between both designer in regard to the style of the work because if lighting, sound, set and costume don't work together, what's the point? You have to pay attention to what each designer is doing in order to maintain a whole, especially with a production like this. In some theatre the elements are deliberately separate. With *The Spook* the elements needs to have a cohesive feel simply because the play is so busy and it is contains a lot of information. Consequently, it needs to be a unified picture.

## INTERVIEW WITH RICHARD DINNEN, LIGHTING DESIGNER, AND DAVID FRANZKE, SOUND DESIGNER FOR *THE SPOOK*

---

**What was your response when you first read the script of *The Spook*, or first became aware of the play? Did it generate any particular ideas?**

**Richard:**

What was particularly interesting was the very beginning of the play. It throws up some imagery of *film noir*, the lonely man in the bedroom and light rays gleaming through the window, a man totally captivated by the microphone and the tape deck he is using. Then it blows out into domesticity. Suddenly, you are in Bendigo, and it's not a spy setting any longer. I think it was those initial strong contrasts that drew me in. Then I was drawn to the idea of how it would unravel and what it would become.

**David:**

I didn't have any particularly strong images when I first read it. My ideas have been arriving very slowly. Most things I read I usually have very strong ideas. I think with *The Spook* it is about where the play is placed, its stage directions and setting. For instance; *the year is 1964, the tape plays back his voice, the television is on, they are listening to an episode of Pick-a-Box*. As a sound designer, this play is very prescriptive in terms of what it is asking me to do. I think I initially shut down and thought that these were rudimentary, constructed sounds that I had to create and that the rest would come to me as I saw it on the floor and saw a style emerge. When you work with a director like Tom Healey, a style tends to emerge and appear later in the process because that is the way he works. Until you find the right temperature for the piece, and until you have watched it move from one scene to another you can't actually design very much.

**So in terms of designing a play like *The Spook*, the process will differ greatly from more form driven pieces of theatre?**

**David:**

Sometimes you can read a script or a concept, go away and write an hour's worth of music and feel very fired up and ready to move in a certain direction. But this is not that sort of process.

**Richard, what do you see as being the role of lighting in a production?**

*To see the white's of the actors' eyes*, as they used to say. More seriously, lighting is used in this play to create mood, setting and style, and this is generally how it is used. As I said earlier, the audience is initially asked to believe they are in a *film noir* setting, then in a living room, or a backyard or a garage. I think one of the challenges of lighting a play such as this is that the set doesn't actually change. Through lighting and sound we are creating several different places – two different houses, a police station, a garage – all within the same set that has no physical changes except for character costume changes. Therefore, the role of the lighting and sound is critical.

In my design I want to achieve different tones to people's living rooms, whether it be dusk or night time. In Elli and George's house – which has been designed as new wave 1960s – we are using fluoro lighting. This is so that the audience can say, well, we're in a different house now. Then in Martin and Annette's house and it will be warmer and speak more about an older place.

**So, from what you are describing, your role is to light the actors, create the space and...**

And manipulate and create the mood within that. As well I have to create a sense of the period and time in which the play is set. There is also the opportunity to sculpt the set as well because of the windows and the dimensions of the set. The design allows me to sculpt a lot of the architecture through side light which will assist in adding tension throughout the production.

**David what do you see as being the role of sound in a production?**

In a play such as this the main point of sound is to get the audience from one place to another as gracefully and smoothly as possible. In reference to what Richard was saying, in this production the role of sound is quite specific. As I watch I might say; right it is 1.00am in the morning and we are in a garage and its 1964. So I have selected particular crickets and birds from field recordings I have made. I've made decisions such as; it's a hot summer night and the audience is going to hear a cicada. I'm inventing a mythical park from a series of field recordings of different parks such as the Botanical Gardens and its small lake that has bell birds. So, when the characters in the play go to the park it is a very distinct park atmosphere that repeats every time. I'm in the process of creating this time of sound design for each of the places in the play so that when the audience is returned to them, they hear the same sounds. These are the naturalistic choices I've designed for *The Spook* and they serve a particular role.

The other aspects of the sound design for this play achieve other things. Many of the sounds are constructed music or recordings of old Greek songs. I've been lucky in that I've found a recording of Greek songs of resistance from the 1950s during the civil war. This has been a very useful find as I'm able to use several snippets from it. In sound design you often have to use pre-existing sounds or music and you need to apply for the rights to the music of the period. I did spend a lot of time trying to write 1960s music but it doesn't work in this type of production – rural Bendigo in the 1960s. The play tends to roll and lilt from scene to scene and you actually need real music from that period and you need to obtain the rights.

**What would like the sound to achieve in this production?**

I want it to set place and time. The transitional sounds are very important. For me the transitional sounds are about anticipating what is going to come next. I tend to watch the scene that is going to come afterwards or before, pick up on the main juncture points then try to convey that in twelve seconds.

**What are the challenges and / or limitations in relation to designing for *The Merlyn Theatre*?**

**Richard:**

It is a big space and this is something I am realising as the production progresses. We're creating a false proscenium for the play. This is one of Anna Borghese's design elements for the set and this cuts its down visually while, at the same time, increases the technical demands and degree of difficulty in terms of lighting it. I am challenged by this in terms of making all the lighting angles work and constantly needing to consider the OH& S (occupational health and safety aspects) of the design. I am constantly thinking that I need to position the lights where I want them to hit where they need to but also miss where I want them to. The design works something like a wide-screen television with the borders at both top and bottom. It is

becoming quite side-lighting heavy so that I can work around the design and the front of house lighting is a twelve to fifteen metre throw in order to come in under the proscenium and to hide the gantry. That's the Merlyn challenge. The gantry (nicknamed Hilary) will be being used as a back lighting bar.

The Merlyn is a fantastic space, particularly when it is opened up and used like that but its size means that it can swallow a cast. It would be a fun space to play with.

***David, what about designing the sound for the Merlyn?***

I like it. It has a slightly live edge. It's not a dead space and the sound bounces around in a way that I think is right for a theatre venue. That's evidenced by the fact that the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra have been performing all their new works there in the Merlyn Theatre over the past few years and the ABC technical crew have been recording them there because it is such a good space for sound. A cast member can be heard in the back row without the actor having to scream or yell and since the new public address system has enhanced its capabilities.

*The Spook* design is useful for me as sound designer because I can create some nice sound travelling. A cue can begin front of house by hiding the speakers behind the false proscenium and then it can travel upstage so that we hear, for examples, the crickets at the back and then back again. I enjoy being able to design sound in that way. The size of the Merlyn means that there is distance between the speakers that allows for these types of effects and sound tricks.

***How would you both describe the style of The Spook?***

**Richard:**

It has certainly been ranging through a number of styles as it is being produced.

**David:**

I think it is on a razor's edge between a straight drama with a very clear narrative yet the style in which what is being told is not that at all. I don't think it has made up its mind.

**Richard:**

I know that with the lighting we are going into the space with lots of options. Nearly every light has a single channel allocated to it so that we can sit there and play. We have those *film noir* moments, those kitchen-sink drama scenes then the heightened mood of the park. When we move into the park there is a lovely lighting effect which seems quite like a fantasy land but it is in fact a reality. Bringing all those moments together means that the style hasn't made up its mind and won't have until production week when plotting starts.

**David:**

It is very difficult to call it a particular style at this stage...

**Richard:**

It's a melting pot of styles really.

**David:**

It's trying not to be any one style.

***So you mean that it references a number of styles but isn't any one in particular?***

**Richard:**

Yes, and I think this goes right back to the question about first impressions. We're alone in a room with an intense young man and then the opens up to a party meeting and we're in a different style all together.

THE SPOOK EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE © MALTHOUSE THEATRE 2005

***Richard, there is a number of practical lighting designs in the set. How did these come about?***

**Richard:**

I've pretty much been told that these need to be part of the lighting design. There has been some discussion about the physical design of the prac lighting such as making it look like a garage light or a particular 960s lounge room light. The garage light in particular has meant that both Tom and I have been recalling our childhood in regard to garage lights.

***Is it the old hanging light bulb?***

**Richard:**

Tom sees it as having a type of cyclone fence around it and I see it as having the tin coolie shade. Then there is the question about what effect it will have – is it a physical light as well as a prac. If it is a naked bulb it may blind an audience. Those types of conversations have been common.

***David, is any of the sound practical or is it all pre-recorded?***

**David:**

I wanted a lot of it to be practical but for reasons of potential actor error in regard to vinyl records it just doesn't work. What it has become is a recording of me putting on a vinyl record on with all the little scratchy noises, the actors mime doing that but it is actually the record playing from the unit that is started by stage management. That is my way around that. Similarly the tape recorder used by Martin has to be re-wound and replayed. So I have gone and sourced a reel-to-reel tape and have recorded Martin saying the lines into a microphone, recorded the fast rewind and played it then made that into a sound cue. So when he moves his hand and does that it cues. Hopefully I will have a speaker placed right under the bed so that when the sound is played back it achieves a sense that it is coming from the tape deck itself.

Then there is a whole scene from Pick-a-Box [quiz show from the 1960s]. That isn't real it is an actor. There are recordings of the original show but you can't access them. So, I used the radio recordings I had of Bob Dyer and Dolly and I used Peter Houghton as Bob and Val Levkowitz as Dolly. Val also does the voice of the woman who gets the questions wrong. That one cue is a whole evening's work.

This show is the type of show where I can spend three hours on a twenty second cue and still not be happy with it that's how fiddly it can be.

**Meg:**

The audience will be very lucky. *The Spook* is the type of production that will resonate strongly with a particular generation of audience members. This will make all your attention to detail very worthwhile.

***Would you talk about the collaboration process in regard to the design. With whom have you collaborated?***

**David:**

It's been quite good. Richard, Tom and myself have sat around and gone through the script, page by page, discussing every point at which things will need to occur. We tend to do this in a very relaxed way.

**Richard:** THE SPOOK EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE © MALTHOUSE THEATRE 2005

I find the best collaboration time is when we arrive at the plotting. Having worked with Tom and David before has revealed that this point is valuable. I like to do a lighting plot with the sound because we lock in a lot of the lighting with the sound as it is moving so that it helps create the look and tone of the work. The collaboration at this point is very useful and constructive. With so much work and detail going into the sound for a show like this you can sense the mood without even having the actors on the stage.

***Do you think the play explores any particular themes and ideas and have you been mindful of those when you've designing the sound and lighting?***

**David:**

Well it's about a kid who is asked to be spy at the football game. He does and then by the end of the play realises that if he had realised then what he knows now it would have been different. That spins off into other things such as what is the nature of patriotism, national pride, our fear of other cultures and other political ideologies.

**Richard:**

It does resonate with today's society. What we saw back to the 1960s there was a government creating fear and that is exactly what we have now with the new threat of terrorism.

**David:**

There is a classic scene in the play where Annette, Martin's wife, is at a dinner party at George and Elli's and she starts talking about Kim Philby, the British spy. Here I drop out the atmosphere and go to total silence. Then the idea is that we hear a very evil sound scape so that the audience feel quite goose pimpled and unnerved. I think, that for me, the play is about how the Western World has been brain washed on so many levels. When I listen to my grandfather talk to me about that time I look at him and realise that he believes what he has been fed by the government. As generations become more cynical I think that is good and this play provides an opportunity to reflect upon that and the naivety of people in the 1960s.

## IN CONVERSATION WITH MARIA THEODORAKIS AND TONY NIKOLAKOPOULOS, CAST MEMBERS OF *THE SPOOK*

---

*In this production of The Spook, Maria plays the role of Elena (Elli) Tassakis and Tony plays the role of George Tassakis.*

***How would each of you describe the characters you play in The Spook?***

**Tony:**

George Tassakis is a defector from Greece. He had to leave because of his Communist beliefs or he would have been jailed. He has travelled to Australia on a false passport with his wife and child and since arriving they have had another child. Socially, George is quite laid-back but when it comes to things he is passionate about he is capable of firing up. I don't see George as being the stereotypical Greek that we see in film and on television, he has very strong political and social views.

**Maria:**

And he's lived it hasn't he...back in Greece.

**Tony:**

Yes, he's actually lived what he is talking about which makes his passion more justified. George hates wasted time and this is one of the things that becomes apparent in the play, particularly the amount of time that is wasted in the Communist Party meetings. Internally he is churning because he thinks that so much more could be done. However, he's not going to challenge it too much because he realises that this is what he has to put up with in order to get to where things need to.

**Maria:**

My character, Elena or Elli, is also quite political. She comes from a very political family in Greece, a Communist family. She fell in love with George and when he had to leave Greece, she was obviously going to come with him. Their relationship is very much one of intellectual equals. They respect each other's views to the point that they are able to argue and debate these political issues. While George is very laid back, Elli is very much a fire cracker and can't hold her tongue about hypocrisy and time wasting. They balance each other well because of their contrasting characters.

For Elli, she too has lived a communist life, although she wasn't a soldier and she wasn't on the front line. I think there is also a certain naivety to Elli's idealism and take on the world. It is her desire to trust that gets the family into trouble. I don't think you should walk around being mistrustful of everyone but Elli's desire to trust is terribly shaken when she is betrayed. She has a real belief in humanity and a real belief that things can change. She is incredibly hopeful and positive in that way. This makes the betrayal even more poignant.

***Would you talk about the rehearsal room process and how you have created these characters.***

**Maria:**

It began for me before getting into the rehearsal room. I knew a limited amount about the milieu we were in. I went and borrowed books and rediscovered books that I had bought when I went to Greece. I read books on the Greek Civil War and how modern Greece came about, the post World War II struggle and then the post



Civil War struggle in Greece. I also read about Australian Communism and where it sat in the 1960s. Part of my research involved going and interviewing a Greek Australian man who is still a Communist at heart and lived a life very similar to Tony's character, George, in that he had to flee Greece because he was a known Communist. When he arrived in Australia he joined the Communist Party and was a regional organiser, similar to George. I used the book, *USE MY FIFTH* preparation was reading about that period and time and then having a human face and human experience as a resource. I asked this man questions as my character and as an actor. Then I sat with that knowledge pre-rehearsal.

In the rehearsal room it has been quite technical. Melissa's writing is very rhythmic and it is about technically hitting specific moments in order for the story to be told.

**Tony:**

I've played a couple of film characters that are not so much the same but of a similar background in that they were Greek Communists, so I had explored that time and period before. The thing that comes most strongly from those experiences is the sense of displacement. George is a character who didn't choose to leave his homeland. What this does is instil in you a sense of accepting the time you have and the place that you're in. Therefore, it makes your character able to exist in the moment and appreciate it for what it is.

I also met the gentleman that Maria found who had to leave Greece at eighteen or join the army and this wasn't an option. He explained to me that the first thing that happened when you joined the army was that they interrogated you to discover whether you had Communist beliefs. If you were Communist the army had prisons they sent you to in order to *re-educate* you to the point of submission. His father knew that he wouldn't deny his Communism so he sent his son away. So he explained why he had become so passionate about Communism and it was not so much to make a difference globally, but to make a difference locally. He worked in a factory where there was no union and he wanted to work for better conditions such as sick leave and holiday pay.

So like Maria I had all that knowledge to take with into the rehearsal room. Then what starts to happen as you begin to rehearse is that the words are said, the character starts to emerge and then it develops through the relationships with other characters. I find there is a subtle difference with each time I play a scene. I don't ever feel that it is exactly the same each time. It often depends on the frame of mind I am in and what I bring to the rehearsal. Sometimes Elli and George's arguments can have more heat to them and sometimes they're more playful.

For instance in the meetings I feel that on the surface it is always played the same but it's different from the inside. I'm not always trying to hit the same point. I don't think about what I did last time I go into it trusting that something else will come out.

**Meg:**

One of the advantages to being able to see the show several times is being able to watch those shifts and changes in the characters and moments. It's something that a general audience doesn't necessarily have access to. When you read the script the characters could initially seem quite narrowly drawn but they're not. They're actually very rich and that is testimony to your craft as actors.

**Maria:**

I also think that it is in the writing. Melissa really loves people and it feels like she really loves these characters so as a writer she's given us a gift. I think the director,

Tom loves them as well. I certainly have an extra sense of ownership when I am playing a Greek character. I don't do it often but there is a sense that I have to be extra vigilant with how I communicate this character.

***I wanted to ask you both about the significance of being Greek and playing Greek characters.***

**Maria:**

As Tony said there are a lot of stereotyped Greek characters that have been portrayed.

***Do you mean Wogs out of Work type characters?***

**Maria:**

The thing about 'Wogs out of Work' though is that when I saw it in 1986 it was a revelation, it was brilliant. But twenty years later it's more like – alright already! I'm not denouncing the show at all, I think that was a stage we had to go through.

**Tony:**

I think commercially it was such a success that as a result it was milked for all it was worth. The original motivation though was about doing a show that the Greek community could relate to – a show about family, cousins etc. They weren't aware of how successful it would be.

**Maria:**

When I saw *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* I thought, well we were doing that twenty years ago! I guess what I am saying too is that the portrayal of Greeks in theatre and film, and the portrayal of any ethnic group, elderly people, gay people, any group that you can pigeon hole can become a stereotype. I think that is lazy writing, lazy directing and lazy acting but it does begin with the writing. I don't think that Melissa's writing does that at all. I performed in another play of Melissa's plays entitled *Who's Afraid of the Working Class*. She wrote a Greek character for that play that I was lucky enough to play and I felt the same way.

***Do you feel that she has an ability to allow you to be very truthful to the roles?***

**Maria and Tony:**

Yes.

**Maria:**

And she allows your characters to be comic as well as truthful without being stereotyped.

***What is your character's journey within this play?***

**Maria:**

Elli begins as being quite frustrated by the bureaucracy and formality of meetings. She is screaming inside and really wanting to talk instead of doing the Anglo Saxon thing of an agenda and ticking the boxes. Mind you George, the Communist we spoke with, mentioned the thing he loved about being in the Communist Party in Australia was that they got stuff done. Yes it is well and good to have passionate conversation but let's get stuff done! That's what he thought the Australians were great at.

I think Elli has an incredible sense of justice. The very first action I have is defending somebody else. So Elli has idealism but a great sense of justice and a short fuse when it comes to pettiness. The idealism is very much something that she holds onto but as the story progresses she becomes very critical of the things she believes in as she sees them being manipulated.

THE SPOOK EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE © MALTHOUSE THEATRE 2005

Elli is a questioner. She doesn't say; okay this is Communism and I have to toe the line. She questions contemporary Communism and believes that it has to change and it has to evolve. The very first sense of betrayal she has is when Russia or the USSR invades Czechoslovakia. That devastates her because she was so encouraged by Prague Spring. For someone who is essentially law abiding and good at heart that invasion is a huge political betrayal. Her second and major sense of betrayal is George's imprisonment and impending deportation. She cannot believe that the Australian government is doing what they're doing to George whom she knows is a good person. Finally there is the sense of betrayal she feels about Martin, who is someone she loved - and there is a sense of being in love with him even though it isn't a threat to her marriage.

**Tony:**

The main journey for George is his sense of romance and passion about where he wants things to go and what he wants them to be. His hardest struggle is to trust and allow people into his real world. It is obvious that George hasn't really shared with anyone who he really is except his wife so part of his journey is the struggle of having to live with the secret of his past. It comes out in the drunken scene with Martin and Elli where Elli reveals more about George than he would wish but he goes with that and he trusts Martin. So his journey is about being able to share that part of his life that has been locked away. Then it all falls apart and at that point his romantic dreams and aspirations are destroyed. Up until that point he was able to raise a family and try to live in a way that he believed Australia wanted him to be while still believing in his passion. So, his journey is quite tragic.

***As actors, how do you prepare for a performance?***

**Tony:**

I have a cigarette! Oops, sorry.

**Maria:**

It depends on the show. In this show we have quite a lot of costuming and props to think about. We also have to perform a Cossack dance near the beginning which is quite physical so we have to do a good physical warm up. Because we are performing in the Merlyn Theatre it is very important to have a voice warm up for that space

**Tony:**

Definitely a voice warm up and stretching. I like to focus but I tend to do that just prior to the beginning of the first scene. I like to think about the scene I'm about to perform and get into that head space. I also read over the script at least once a day even when the play is well run in.

***You've touched on this in earlier responses but do you think that the play explores any particular ideas and themes?***

**Tony:**

The main thing I see this as a parallel to, that is the way communists were treated in the 1960s, is the way that Muslims are perceived today. Because there are some

bad eggs in the group, anyone who looks like an Arab is perceived to be a terrorist. This has proven particularly true in Sydney.

**Maria:**

And, again, it's very American led like it was in the 1960s.

THE SPOOK EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE © MALTHOUSE THEATRE 2005

**Tony:**

There are places in Sydney's southern suburbs where there have been a few problems with some of the Lebanese youth. So people generalise that into anyone who comes from that area must be bad news. It's like there is a stigma attached to them. That's one of the parallels I see between this play and contemporary ideas and issues; the fear and mistrust of minority groups.

## Questions for Analysis and Discussion

### Structure and Narrative:

1. In one paragraph outline the structure of the play, *The Spook* (2005).
2. More particularly, what is the plot?
3. Describe how the play is structured ie into what scenes, acts and time lines. Is this a familiar structure?
4. How would you describe the language of the play?
5. If you have read the script and seen the performance, what differences did you notice between the printed script and the performance script ie. Stage directions, language, narrative changes?

### On Play Writing:

1. Melissa Reeves says; 'I want to write plays that struggle with the momentous events of the present...the past...and challenge the orthodoxy'. What do you think she means by this?
2. In what ways do you think *The Spook* achieves this?
3. What do you think it means to be a *political writer*?
4. The playwright talks about 'sculpting'. How might a play be 'sculpted' by a writer?

### Directing and Interpretation:

1. The director, Tom Healey, describes the play as 'non-psychological' and 'very character driven' and this has subsequently influenced his directing. Do the characters drive the narrative? How is this reflected in the direction?
2. Director, Tom Healey, believes the play is 'metaphoric'. What is it a metaphor of and how is this made clear through the directing and staging of the work?
3. The director also talks about the need to be 'pragmatic' or very practical in regard to this play. From your experience of seeing the production, what do you think he means by this?
4. Tom Healey says that he wanted to bring the end of the play '...to a more thunderous conclusion than it has in the printed version'. Re-read the final scene of the play and then consider the performed text. What directorial choices have been made in order to deepen the impact of Martin's actions?
5. The director says, 'I see my task as a director of this play as being as faithful as possible to what the playwright has written'. Is this possible? In what ways do you think this has been achieved?
6. This is the second production of *The Spook* [initially produced by Company B Belvoir in 2004/2005]. Both productions have had two different creative and performing teams. In what ways might this impact on the interpretation of the work?

### Themes:

1. Playwright, Melissa Reeves, talks about the play as being one about the damage we can do to lives by making 'heedless decisions'. How is this act of heedlessness explored in the play?
2. The play explores the politics of the time. What comment is it making on this?

3. 'Truth, and lies and what individual responsibility means' – how does the play explore these ideas?
4. Tom Healey talks about the play exploring Australia's view of itself as being 'innocent' and that 'we don't own what we do'. What does he mean by this?
5. Some of the creative team talk about the demonising of minority groups. In what ways does this have a contemporary resonance?
6. Sound Designer, David Franzke, believes that the play explores, '...the nature of patriotism, national pride, our fear of other cultures and other political ideologies'. Comment on this with regard to the production and current world events.
7. What other themes or concepts do you think the play explores? How are they explored ie. Character, script, directing, acting, stagecraft?

### **Set and Costume Design:**

1. From memory, sketch out the set design for *The Spook* and list as many props as you can recall.
2. In what ways does the set reflect the era in which the play is set?
3. Designer, Anna Borghese, talks about the need to very practical in regard to the design for the play. Discuss how the design works on a very practical level.
4. Anna Borghese describes the play as having a 'kitchen-sink' feel. What do you think she means by this? How does the design reflect a sense of domesticity?
5. The set is a fixed space but the play travels to many locations. How does the set design allow for this? What other design elements assist in these shifts in location?
6. One of the locations is in a park at night. How does the set design work to take the audience to this particular location?
7. The set is framed by a false proscenium arch. Discuss the impact of this.
8. Anna Borghese talks about the outside design as emphasising, '...very small figures in a very big landscape', and the interiors as emphasising '...large characters in a confined space'. What is your response to this? Did the design work to create these two worlds / effects?
9. The set designer talks about revealing the workings of the theatre to the audience. How does the design achieve this?
10. Lighting Designer, Richard Dinnen, says, 'the design works something like a wide-screen television with the borders at both top and bottom'. Is this the effect that it had on you? Explain.
11. How do the costumes create a sense of the historical period? How do the costumes help define particular characters and their status?
12. There are a number of wigs used in the play. What effect do these have in terms of setting the period and the creation of character?
13. Designer, Anna Borghese, says that within the set design '...there are references to the politics' and 'I think it is important thematically that one half of the design is particularly British in its interior and the other house has more of a European influence'. Discuss how these ideas are reflected in the set design.

**Lighting and Sound:**

1. Lighting designer, Richard Dinnen, says that the purpose of lighting in this production is, 'to create mood, setting and style'. What moods, places and styles are suggested by the use of lighting?
2. The lighting designer also talks about 'tone'. What does he mean by this?
3. What angles are used to light the play? What effects are achieved by these?
4. There are a number of prac lights on the set. What function do these serve?
5. The lighting designer talks about 'sculpting' the set. What does he mean by this?
6. Sound designer, David Franzke, describes the function of sound as being, 'to get the audience from one place to another as smoothly as possible'. How does sound function in this way in *The Spook*? Give some specific examples.
7. David Franzke talks about the 'temperature' of a piece. What does he mean? How does sound work to create a 'temperature' in this production?
8. He also talks about setting time and place. What particular sounds allowed you to feel as if you were in the 1960s, in a garage, or outside in a park?

**Style:**

1. Playwright, Melissa Reeves, says of her work that it is a 'tragi-comedy'. What aspects of the production reflect this?
2. Director, Tom Healey, talks about the play 'referencing' several genres – thrillers, comedy, political satire, Buffon clown. Discuss these references and how they are explored in the play.
3. Designer, Anna Borghese describes the style of the play as being 'heightened'. What aspects of *The Spook* would you describe as being heightened?
4. The designer also discusses the notion of 'meta-theatre'. What does she mean by this? What is your understanding of meta-theatre?
5. Lighting designer, Richard Dinnen, believes that *The Spook* throws up images of 'film noir'. How is this style reflected in the production?
6. How would you describe the overall style of the play? Do you think it is an example of eclectic contemporary Australian theatre? Explain.

**Stage Management:**

1. *The Spook* has both a Stage Manager (SM) and an Assistant Stage Manager (ASM). It also uses a Mechanist as part of its backstage crew. Consider the design and style of the play and suggest why a show such as *The Spook* would require three backstage crew members. What role would each person have during a performance?
2. What is a 'prompt script' and how is it used in a production?

**Acting and Characterisation:**

1. Research has been a major factor for the actors' preparation in this play. What research have the two Greek actors conducted? Why do you think research is important for an actor?
2. Seven actors play sixteen characters in this play. How is this achieved? How do we as an audience respond to this choice?

3. Anna Borghese believes the characters are quite complex in *The Spook*. Which character do you think is the most complex? What leads you to believe this?
4. Maria Theodorakis, who plays Elli, describes her character as being, '...incredibly hopeful and positive' and that she has 'a real belief in humanity'. Discuss how these qualities are made evident through acting and direction.
5. Actor, Tony Nikolakopoulos, says that it is in the rehearsal room that the characters really start to emerge – 'words are said' and then, 'they develop through the relationships with other characters'. How are these aspects made evident in the performance?
6. The actors talk about Elli and George as having a sense of 'displacement'. How is this idea played out on stage?
7. Select one actor from the play and discuss how their character is realised through voice, movement, and gesture.
8. The two actors interviewed talk about their character's 'journey'. What is meant by a character's journey? What is Martin's journey? What is Annette's journey?

#### **Audience:**

1. How would you describe the seating and playing space configuration of the Merlyn Theatre as set up for *The Spook*?
2. In what ways does the design and space created for *The Spook* construct an actor / audience relationship?
3. Consider what you saw and what you didn't see in the play. As an audience member, what does this ask you to assume, imagine, or make decisions about?
4. Does the play make any particular assumptions in regard to its audience?
5. What particular aspects of the performance do you feel were reliant on a live audience? What did you particularly respond to and why?

#### **On Theatre:**

1. Director, Tom Healey, says of the role of theatre is, '...that it brings a group of people together in the same space to experience something...that is where theatre and film differ as mediums'. Would you agree that this is the role of theatre?
2. Playwright, Melissa Reeves, says that playwrights need to, '...keep on working, keep on writing and find places to put our work on...We must re-claim the stages'. Are playwrights relevant any longer? What do you see as being their role in a highly technical 21<sup>st</sup> century?



# ACTIVITIES

THE SPOOK EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE © MALTHOUSE THEATRE 2005

## **DRAMATURGY:**

Read the script of the play a number of times:

- Make a list of terms that you feel position the text in the 1960s
- Write an explanation for these terms so that the actors and director understand their meaning and context

## **SET DESIGN:**

Read the script and make a list of the locations the play is set in. Imagine that *The Spook* was to be staged in a theatre with a revolve which will allow each location and place to be set off stage and then revolved around for the required scene

- Create a sketch design of the set for each of the locations
- Make a list of props

## **ACTING:**

Select one of the double roles played by one of the actors.

- Read and learn the lines for a scene or section of a scene where you play each of the characters
- Make notes about the differences between the characters and interpretative choices you would make
- Perform as one character, and then re enter the space and perform the other character
- Write an analysis of this process

## **RESEARCH / ROLE PLAY:**

Conduct some detailed research about ASIO and being a spy.

- Present a paper / speech / lecture to a group whereby you take on the role of a spy and give an insight into your life with ASIO

## **MARKETING & PUBLICITY:**

In this role you are required to advertise and market the play:

- Design a poster and a flier for *The Spook*
- Write a media release for the show which captures what you feel is the essence of the play

# RESOURCES

THE SPOOK EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE © MALTHOUSE THEATRE 2005

The following websites may be of use for students and teachers wanting to research some of the themes and content of *The Spook*.

1. A.S.I.O.

Yes, belief it or not, this secret intelligence society has a website. The character of Alex works for ASIO and it is to this organisation that Martin is co-opted.

[www.asio.gov.au](http://www.asio.gov.au) – learn how to be a spy

2. The Communist Party of Australia

The current incarnation of communist ideology in Australia. It has current actions and provides links to the history of the party in Australia.

[www.cpa.org.au](http://www.cpa.org.au)

3. The Man from U.N.C.L.E. – television show

A television spy show referenced in the play that followed the adventures of American and Russian cold war spies.

This is the official Fans from UNCLE website

[www.manfromuncle.org](http://www.manfromuncle.org)

4. The Civil War in Greece

Both Elli and George Tassakis fled their homeland of Greece during the Civil War, a war in which Communists were persecuted.

[www.marxists.org/subject/greek-civil-war](http://www.marxists.org/subject/greek-civil-war)

[www.macedonian-heritage.gr](http://www.macedonian-heritage.gr)

5. Australia in the 1960s

Trawl through this site to give yourself a background to what was happening in Australia during the time the play was set.

[www.abc.net.au](http://www.abc.net.au)

6. The Hungarian Revolution against the USSR

The crushing of the Hungary revolt against Soviet rule had an impact all over the world.

[www.bbc.uk/onthisday](http://www.bbc.uk/onthisday)

7. The invasion of Czechoslovakia by the USSR

Chronicles the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the USSR and its allies, an invasion which crushed the reform movement known as the Prague Spring.

[www.lib.umich.edu/spec-coll/czech](http://www.lib.umich.edu/spec-coll/czech)