

GARAGE GIRLS



CANDACE MILES, MADELAINE NUNN
and ANNA RODWAY



 LA MAMA

Education Resource

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TO THE TEACHER

These resources have been prepared to support you in using *Garage Girls* as a play to study and perform in your school.

You can use it as a whole or take exercises or parts of it to jump into exploring the play with your class.

It covers style, structure, themes and the context of the play.

This resource includes activities to help you and your students stage scenes from the play.

ABOUT THE PLAY

Garage Girls is a play inspired by pioneering feminist figure Alice Anderson – founder of Australia’s first all-girl garage, inventor, mechanic, and entrepreneur. Set in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne during the 1920s, the story unfolds against the backdrop of a society emerging from war, navigating prohibition, the rise of the motor car, and recovery from the Spanish Flu pandemic. Overall, it was a decade of great change. Women cut their hair short, drove cars, danced to jazz music and dressed in clothing that signalled a newfound “freedom”.



2023, photo from *Garage Girls*, by Shift Theatre & Three Birds Theatre
Photographer: Darren Gill
<https://www.theshifttheatre.com/projects/garage-girls>

The play features around fifty characters, developed through extensive archival research and inspired by Loretta Smith’s biography, *A Spanner in the Works: The Story of Alice Anderson*.

While grounded in historical fact, the work is a theatrical reimagining of Alice Anderson’s life – blending truth and invention to celebrate her spirit of independence and innovation.

In the original production, one actor played Alice Anderson, while four others transformed into all remaining characters. In a school context, the play offers rich possibilities for large ensemble casting, doubling, and inventive staging. Despite its title, *Garage Girls* includes numerous roles for male-identifying performers making it a versatile piece.

The story follows Alice’s extraordinary determination to forge her own path as a successful, self-made businesswoman. Defying the gender expectations of her time, she employs an all-female staff, runs a chauffeur service, teaches women to drive, and manages her own thriving garage – until her remarkable life is tragically cut short.

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHTS

Garage Girls was co-written by Three Birds Theatre.

CANDACE MILES

Candace is an award-winning theatre-maker and actor, graduating in 2015 from the Victorian College of the Arts. Candace co-founded ensemble company Three Birds Theatre which has created and toured original theatre shows across Australia to critical acclaim.



MADELAINE NUNN

Madelaine is an AWGIE-winning writer/ theatre-maker/ actor and a recipient of the highly coveted Purse Prize. Since graduating from the VCA, Madelaine has won The Martin Lysicrates Prize, ATYP Rebel Wilson Theatremaker Scholarship, The ATYP Foundation Commission and The Jopuka Eldersee Commission. She has been shortlisted for the Rodney Seaborn Playwrights Award three times and longlisted for the Griffin Award, the Lysicrates Prize and has two Green Room Award nominations. She has toured her work throughout Victoria, NSW, UK and the US.



ANNA RODWAY

Anna works with words and stories across the arts, literature and academia. She is the recipient of the 2024 Abbie Clancy Award, a University of Sydney Postgraduate Award and is currently completing her PhD in interwar women's writing (Australian/British fiction). A VCA alumni, Anna has written, performed and toured five acclaimed works with her theatre company Three Birds Theatre.



CONTEXT: ALICE ANDERSON

Alice Anderson: Trailblazer, inventor and entrepreneur

Alice Anderson was born in 1897 in Melbourne. She worked as a chauffeur at age 20 and began running an auto-workshop from the back of a house in Kew. Two years later, she established Australia's first all-female garage.

While juggling the workload of both the garage and chauffeur business Alice invented the 'Radi-waiter', a flask that attached to the radiator of a car, allowing her to keep food or drink warm for a picnic at the end of a day trip.

In 1918 she invented the 'Get-out-and-Get-Under', a device used to roll a mechanic under a car whilst working.

Sadly, Anderson failed to patent this invention and after showing it to an American it became a staple in most garages and is now known as the 'Creeper'.

Alice never conformed to convention. She was one of five children and according to her sisters, Alice was allowed to run wild – hunting rabbits, fishing and hiking through the forest with her brother. She attended the Church of England Grammar School, but this was cut short after her parents' finances ran out and she was forced to leave. She began book-keeping for her father's Motor Service business where she learned to drive and repair vehicles.

When Alice turned 18, her father "gifted" her a 7-seater, Hupmobile, an American touring car. However, he had only paid a deposit. To keep the car, she had to pay back a car debt, so Alice got busy. She started a chauffeur business. As a female driver, she was in demand. Parents enlisted her to drive their daughters safely home from dances, country women employed her to take them shopping and expectant mothers trusted her to take them to the hospital.



1918, Alice wearing a chauffeur uniform.
Courtesy of University of Melbourne Archives;
[1988.0061.01551](https://www.unimelb.edu.au/1988.0061.01551)



1925, Jessie Millar and two other Garage Girls getting about their daily routine.

You can see the old lathe and other must-have tools such as anvils, hammers and the obligatory slab of redgum.

<https://www.streetmachine.com.au/features/alice-anderson-australias-first-all-female-garage>

CONTEXT: ALICE ANDERSON (continued)

Alice undertook an apprenticeship at a Melbourne garage and became a mechanic in 1918. She then successfully negotiated permission to run a motor garage out of her back shed in Kew, Victoria. Alice Anderson founded 'Miss Anderson's Motor Service' – the country's first all-female motor garage. Her aim was to turn a trade into a profession for women. She featured in the press, writing articles about motoring and later, Alice was made a member of the prestigious Lyceum Club for her services to womankind in pioneering a new industry for women.

Shortly after returning from an intrepid adventure out to Alice Springs, Alice was cleaning an automatic pistol in the garage, and it shot her through the head. There were many speculations and inconsistencies concerning the 'accident'. Her death was a mystery and remains so to this day.



c.1922, Alice working at the lathe.

This was expected of all of the Garage Girls. Making parts and brackets was commonplace.
Courtesy of University of Melbourne Archives;
[1988.0061.01556](https://www.unimelb.edu.au/records/1988.0061.01556)

AFTER READING THE PLAY

Group Discussion

- How did the play help you understand more about Australia in the 1920's?
- What did you learn about women's roles during this period?
- How many settings need to be represented on the stage space?
- What set design choices would work for this type of play?
- What realistic conventions do you recognise in the text?
- What non-realistic conventions can you identify?
- What is the Form/Structure of the play?
- How would you use lighting and sound?
- Would you use multi-media at all? Why and what would you use?
- Why is this play important?

2024, production of *Garage Girls*

Production by Carolyn Bock, Helen Hopkins (Shift Theatre) and Candace Miles, Madelaine Nunn & Anna Rodway (Three Birds Theatre). At La Mama Courthouse. 24 April – 5 May 2024

Photographer: Darren Gill



RESOURCES

My Place – Decade Timeline: Australia in the 1920s

https://myplace.edu.au/decades_timeline/decade/1920

Exciting New World: Australia in the 1920s (Royal Australian History Society Blog, 2021)

<https://www.rahs.org.au/exciting-new-world-australia-in-the-1920s>

How Australia’s female garage owner Alice Anderson helped change social attitudes (ABC News Feature article, 2017)

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-11-16/alice-anderson-first-female-garage-owner-continues-to-fascinate/9154340>

Miss Anderson’s Motor Service (State Library of Victoria “Our Stories” blog, 2022)

<https://blogs.slv.vic.gov.au/our-stories/miss-andersons-motor-service/>

The Alice Anderson Memorial Project

<https://www.thealiceandersonmemorialproject.au/>

STYLE

Garage Girls incorporates conventions from **Epic Theatre, Surrealism, and Realism.**

EPIC THEATRE:

- Exploration of 1920's society and issues of gender inequality.
- Actors play multiple roles.
- Roles are generic. e.g.: GARAGE MAN, BANK TELLER. This is intended so that the roles are universal – representing all people working in those roles and all attitudes of the period.
- Minimal set pieces – Simple, symbolic props and costume changes facilitate rapid character transitions.
- Direct Address: Characters break fourth wall, become “narrators” speaking directly to the audience to heighten the immediacy and guide the audience through the various settings and time periods.
- Poetic Language: the language is, at times, verse. This allows the actors to explore the musicality of the words and more non-realistic ways to deliver.
- The use of archival research and the biography of *Alice Anderson: A Spanner in the Works* by Loretta Smith were used to create a theatrical re-imagining of Alice Anderson's Life.

SURREALISM:

- Moments of Fantasy and memory are portrayed. In Scene 2, page 3, Alice enters a moment of fantasy, while requesting a bank loan to start the garage.
- Use of song. In Scene 8. p.18 we witness a memory of Alice as a child. She is in bed with her sisters and the use of an old song transports us back in time.
- Narration/storytelling.

REALISM:

- Natural dialogue: Actors aim to replicate a naturalistic intonation, including hesitations, accents and mannerisms suited to individual characters.
- Naturalistic language suited to the 1920's period is used. The language has a hint of formality in contrast to contemporary speech and then there's the vernacular or specific words that were popular during the era.



Alice at Alice Anderson's Motor Service:
Australia's first all-female workshop.
<https://www.drive.com.au/caradvice/alice-andersons-motor-service-australias-first-all-female-workshop/>

STRUCTURE

Garage Girls is non-linear. It shifts fluidly between times and a multitude of places such as the garage, her family home, Alice Springs, on the road, in a bank or at the newsroom of the Daily Mirror (A Newspaper office).

The play consists of 52 Scenes and an Epilogue.

There are moments of Flashback when we are transported back to Alice's childhood. At points we also enter Alice's subconscious mind as she imagines her future garage and ambitions.



Alice with her 'Get-out-and-Get -Under invention'
<https://www.streetmachine.com.au/features/alice-anderson-australias-first-all-female-garage>

THEMES

When addressing themes, it's always important to consider how they are explored in the text. The following themes are provided using extracts for you to reflect on and discuss. You may have other themes to add to this list.

GENDER EQUALITY

Read Scene 2 on the following page:

In this encounter between a mechanic and Alice, the play clearly highlights the systemic barriers women faced in the 1920's workforce. The motor vehicle industry was very much a male-dominated trade. Alice's qualifications and passion for cars are dismissed because of her gender. In Scene 2 we see her struggle to defy convention.

- Divide the students into pairs – one plays Alice, the other the Garage Man.
- Ask them to perform the scene twice:
- First read – As written in the historical 1920's.
- Second read – Reverse the power dynamic – Alice as the owner of the Garage and the Garage Man as the applicant.
- How did the power dynamic shift the tone and meaning of the scene?
- What does this reveal about gender and status – then and now?



Kew Garage in Melbourne, where Alice Anderson's Motor Service was located.
from the National Motor Museum, via
<https://www.drive.com.au/news/garage-girls-celebrates-australias-first-all-female-workshop/>

THEMES (continued)

SCENE 2

NARRATOR (3): It's 1920s Melbourne!

NARRATOR (4): The streets are alive with the sounds of trams,

NARRATOR (2): The clatter of the horse and carriage—

NARRATOR (3): And the roar of the motorcar!

NARRATOR (1): There's a spring in Alice's step, as she darts through the streets and arrives at a mechanic's garage ...

A burly MECHANIC surveys ALICE. The remaining ensemble transforms into GARAGE WORKERS.

GARAGE MAN: Name.

ALICE: Alecia Elizabeth Foley Anderson. Alice for short.

GARAGE MAN: Age.

ALICE: Twenty years and three-and-a-half months. Give or take a few days.

GARAGE MAN: And you want to work here?

ALICE: A dream.

GARAGE MAN: Well, the books need tidying and the boys love a cuppa in the morning—though you'd have to wear a frock, or a—

ALICE: I'm sorry to interrupt, but I'm actually here for the advertised position of mechanic.

GARAGE MAN: I beg your pardon?

ALICE: The advertised position of mechanic.

GARAGE MAN: I think there's been a misunderstanding.

ALICE: There's no misunderstanding. I have a rigorous and comprehensive working knowledge of the latest four-cylinder, including detailing and body repairs! I drove the Black Spur when I was eighteen, I am skilled with tools and I have the mind of an engineer. Or, so my father says!

GARAGE MAN: Listen, Miss Anderson—let me be frank—the mechanic's life is not for the likes of you.

ALICE: How so?

GARAGE MAN: There'd be too much swearing, for one.

The GARAGE WORKERS guffaw.

ALICE: Well, I wouldn't understand it.

GARAGE MAN: Little lady, I don't mean to be rude but ...

ALICE: I can assure you, I am very serious!

GARAGE MAN: The answer's no.

ALICE: But—I've already been to all five garages in Hawthorn and they've all said no. Look, I'm ready to learn and, more importantly, ready to work.

GARAGE MAN: This ain't women's work.

THEMES (continued)

INSTITUTIONAL PREJUDICE:

Read Scene 3 on the following page:

This scene powerfully exposes the institutional sexism of the 1920's. Despite Alice's vision and intelligence, she is dismissed because she is an unmarried woman without a male guarantor. The banks during this period were rigid, steeped in patriarchal systems. This scene shows us how women were denied access to financial independence, business opportunities and property ownership.

- Why do the bank tellers find Alice's "fantasy moment" so laughable?
- What does this scene reveal about women's access to power and opportunity in the 1920s?
- How does Alice use imagination to fight back against the limitations placed on her?
- What is the function of the fantasy moment in this scene?
- Do you think society still dismisses ambitious women today?



2023, the playwrights and cast of *Garage Girls* pose in costume around an old motorcar from the Drive article by Ben Zachariah

<https://www.drive.com.au/news/garage-girls-celebrates-australias-first-all-female-workshop/>

THEMES (continued)

SCENE 3

BANK WOMAN: Who is your guarantor?

ALICE: Guarantor?

BOTH BANK TELLERS: YES, a guarantor!

ALICE: I didn't realise I had to have a guarantor.

BANK WOMAN: *[laughing]* What? Didn't realise?

BANK MAN: Can you believe it?

BANK WOMAN: No husband—

BANK MAN: No income—

BOTH BANK TELLERS: No guarantor?!

ALICE: I was hoping to get this sorted by myself ...

BANK WOMAN: Is there a Father Anderson?

BANK MAN: Brother Anderson?

ALICE: It's just me! But don't let that dissuade you! Picture this ...

ALICE enters a moment of fantasy.

ALICE: Three storeys high—light streams through the skylight windows! Look down from above and what do you see? A row of newly washed cars, lined up for repair! A seven-seater Hupmobile sparkles in the sun! Ready for a tour on the wide-open road.

A pristine workshop—so clean you could eat off the bench! An office to your left. A bookshelf to your right. Fresh flowers on the sill, just next to the lathe—a feminine touch!

Young girls clamour to learn how to drive. Old girls clamour to learn how to drive. A line around the corner, just to see it for themselves!

Announcing ... Miss Anderson's Motor Service—the first all girl garage in the country!

The BANK TELLERS applaud.

ALICE: Now place it in the Sun!

BOTH TELLERS: Done!

ALICE: And the Sands and McDougall's Directory!

BOTH TELLERS: Done!

ALICE: Tell the neighbourhood! Miss Anderson's Motor Service is ready for—

BANK WOMAN: Earth to Alice!

The BANK TELLERS ring a bell, jerking ALICE back to reality.

BANK MAN: Someone's fallen down the rabbit hole!

The BANK TELLERS laugh in a hysterical yet orderly fashion.

ALICE: So you'll grant me the loan, then?

BANK WOMAN: No husband.

BANK MAN: No loan.

BOTH: No garage.

THEMES (continued)

INNOVATION AND AMBITION:

Read Scene 22 below:

In this scene, we learn a lot about Alice's drive and creativity. For one, she invented the 'get-out and get-under' – a trolley, known today as the 'creeper'. The Narrator draws attention to her ingenuity: An invention of her own, we might add. This immediately foregrounds her as an innovator.

It's clear that the SUITER in this scene is being complimentary and flirtatious. Alice's dialogue reveals a quiet and firm ambition: *Well, I always like to be one step ahead.* This line captures her forward-thinking mindset, prioritising the business and ambition over romance.

SCENE 22

NARRATOR (1): A few weeks later. Alice is on the 'get-out-and-get-under'.

NARRATOR (3): An invention of her own, we might add.

NARRATOR (1): A nervous, but unknowingly charming young man hovers next to her.

The GARAGE GIRLS watch the unfolding interaction with glee.

ALICE: You see, the bearing was off-kilter because of the darn pothole on Burke Road.

SUITOR: I'm still marvelling at the polish. Thank you, Miss Anderson.

ALICE: Oh, that was Marie's doing.

MARIE waves flirtatiously.

ALICE: It's a beauty, this model. When did it come into your possession?

SUITOR: It was a gift from my father.

ALICE: And did you have to pay it off too?

SUITOR: *[confused]* Pardon?

ALICE: Never mind. What a generous gift.

SUITOR: You know, I didn't realise it'd be true.

ALICE: About what?

SUITOR: About you, Miss Alice—your enthusiasm and pluck and unwavering knowledge of the automobile. You're precariously clever!

ALICE: Well, I always like to be one step ahead.

MAGGIE: *[calling]* You can say that again!

ACTIVITY ONE

Return to the **excerpt from Scene 3** and consider the elements of performance and design that could effectively convey the transition from reality (in the Bank) to the moment of fantasy.

Alice says: “Picture this...” and the audience are thrust into her vision of the future garage.

Imagine you are a director addressing the creative team. Create a short presentation using images to explain how you will effectively realise this transition on stage:

Consider how you could achieve this using the following:

- Lighting.
- Sound.
- Movement.



2023, Madelaine Nunn with the cast of **Garage Girls**
from the Drive article by Ben Zachariah

<https://www.drive.com.au/news/garage-girls-celebrates-australias-first-all-female-workshop/>

ACTIVITY TWO

REIMAGINING A MOMENT IN HISTORY

Students select an Australian trailblazer – a person who challenged convention, broke barriers, or pioneered change.

Ask the students to:

- Research the individual's life, values, and context.
- Identify a pivotal moment that shaped their legacy or revealed their character.
- Reimagine that moment as a dramatic monologue or short scripted scene that captures the tension, stakes, and emotion of the event.

Suggested trailblazers from Australian History:

- Edith Cowan (1861 -1932) First woman elected to Australian Parliament.
- Charles Perkins (1936-2000) First Nations Activist; led the Freedom Rides challenging segregation.
- Elizabeth Blackburn (b.1948) Molecular biologist and Nobel Prize winner for telomere research.
- Miles Franklin (1879-1954) Author of *My Brilliant Career* and championed independence.
- Macfarlane Burnet (1899-1985) Immunologist and Nobel Laureate who pioneered understanding of the immune system.

Consider the significant moments in their life, e.g.:

- What were their biggest challenges?
- What motivated them?
- Was there a turning point, a victory, or a personal crisis?
- What decision or action defined who they were?

You could use any theatrical device, e.g.:

- Direct address
- Flashback
- Sound
- Physical action
- Projection

The main goal is to learn about their legacy and attempt to write in their voice.

ACTIVITY THREE

In *Garage Girls*, the playwrights use multiple narrators to efficiently establish place, time, and context. The use of narration can also help to create an illusion of travel on stage.

- Read the scene below and see how the narrators effectively convey Alice’s journey to the shed for lease. A short introduction follows and we are immediately ready to commence the scene with the Landlady, MISS CATTACH.
- In groups of 4/5 create an improvisation using multiple narrators to describe a set of places and directions that one actor travels.
- Think about what the “travelling actor” does on stage during the narration. What movement could they use to symbolise traveling from one place to another?
- Also, consider what the narrators could do on stage, using physical movement (and props) or transformation to create the illusion of travel.

SCENE 5

NARRATOR (3): On a brisk and biting Melbourne morning, Alice weaves her way by the convent, up over the river—

NARRATOR (1): —down Studley Park Road, past the boathouse—

NARRATOR (3): —through the Junction and finds herself in Cotham Road, Kew.

NARRATOR (4): She stands outside a shabby, wooden shed. A ‘For Lease’ sign hangs from the door. Alice is met by the landlady, Miss Cattach.

MISS CATTACH: *[with a thick, Scottish accent]* My brother would usually welcome new tenants but he’s got the dreaded lurgy. Although he is very much better, complaining only of a husky throat! Well, this is it.

ALICE: Oh, it’s ... smaller than the newspaper described it to be ...

MISS CATTACH: You won’t find a roomier place in the whole of Kew.

ALICE: The window pane is broken ...

MISS CATTACH: A hairline crack. As thin as my finger!

ALICE: How draughty does it get in winter?

MISS CATTACH: Winter? Practically summer compared to the Scottish Highlands!

ALICE: I’ll need to have the floors asphalted and the doors put on hinges.

MISS CATTACH: Any kind of luxury upgrade must be paid for by the tenant.

ALICE: It’s not perfect but it does have potential.

MISS CATTACH: My thoughts exactly.

CURRICULUM LINKS: The Australian Curriculum

DRAMA

Senior Secondary	
Creating and Presenting Drama	Students develop and refine their expressive skills to present drama that conveys meaning and engages audiences.
Analysing and Responding to Drama	Students analyse and evaluate how the elements of drama are used to convey meaning in different contexts. v9.australiancurriculum.edu.au

Years 9-10	
AC9ADR10E01	Investigate the ways drama elements, narrative structures and performance styles can communicate meaning.
AC9ADR10E02	Develop and refine drama that explores a range of perspectives, challenging assumptions and stereotypes.
AC9ADR10E04	Analyse and evaluate how drama from different contexts influences understanding of the world.
ACADRM048	Improvise with the elements of drama and narrative structure to develop ideas and explore subtext to shape devised and scripted drama.

ENGLISH

SENIOR SECONDARY	
Unit 1	Students explore how meaning is created through the use of language and stylistic choices in texts. v7.australiancurriculum.edu.au
Unit 2	Students examine different perspectives and how they are represented in texts.

YEAR 9-10	
AC9E10LE01	Explore how ideas, attitudes and voices are represented in texts created in and for different contexts.
AC9E10LY05	Create and edit texts that present a point of view and use language features for impact.
AC9E10LY05	Analyse perspectives and representations of individuals and groups in texts.
AC9E10LY06	Evaluate the aesthetic, social and moral positions of texts.
ACELT1633	Interpret, analyse and evaluate how different perspectives of issue, event, situation, individuals or groups are constructed to serve specific purposes in texts.
ACELY1741	Plan, rehearse and deliver presentations, selecting and sequencing appropriate content and multimodal elements to influence a course of action.

MODERN HISTORY

SENIOR SECONDARY	
ACHMH064	The significance of World Wars I and II for women and the effect of international agreements, for example the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights on the status of women.
ACHMH107	Analyse and account for the different perspectives of individuals and groups in the past.
List 1 Historical knowledge and understanding	Australia, 1918 - 1945
ACHMH121	The adjustment of national priorities in the 1920's, including the tensions between urbanisation, industrialisation and rural development; the difficulties of soldier settlement; the exclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples; and the changing role of women.

This Education Resource was developed by Education Consultant, Donna Hughes, from Australian Plays Transform.