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Actor-Kind: A Feminist-Theory  
Informed, Critical and Creative  
Approach to Developing Empowering  
Theatre for Aotearoa Young People.

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Creative Writing

at Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa / Massey University.

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2023

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## Acknowledgements:

There are many people I would like to thank who have helped me in the process of writing this thesis. Always, my Mum for inspiring a love of theatre and teaching me to take up space in my life, on the page and on stage. Elspeth Tilley, my supervisor who has not only kept me on track but has helped to keep that spark of creativity alive throughout this process. To my wonderful partner for putting up with three years of me being secluded in my study, coming out only to ask out-of-context questions about my plays (or at least it felt like it, right?) And for helping me understand your perspective. To my beautiful black cat Java, for brightening up my zoom calls and keeping my shoulders warm while I wrote. Thank you to my fellow playwrights in the MCW cohort, Paolo and Jasmine, for reading my first drafts and always finding the value in them. Thanks to all who helped with suggestions, musicality or even just encouragement. Finally, thank you to my friends at Massey University and the Drama Society for always being encouraging and letting me share in your love of theatre.

## Abstract:

This thesis critically and creatively addresses issues of gender and empowerment for young people by and through playwriting that is informed by intersectional feminist theory. With initial motivations for the research arising out of the researcher's own mixed experiences of high school drama, which included both distressing and empowering moments, it triangulates this autoethnographic material with semi-structured interviews with 17 respondents. These interviewees likewise reported a range of experiences in high school drama classes, including praise for the potential of theatre to build confidence, disappointment at lack of gender diverse roles, and discomfort or distress with unrelatable characters or harrowing adult situations they were asked to portray.

The interview findings are then combined with feminist criteria for creative work including the Bechdel and Kent tests to develop an original set of criteria for writing inspiring, egalitarian theatre for young people, in which characters are well rounded and gender diverse, and plots offer hope for a future beyond patriarchy. These criteria are applied to analyse two case study plays taken from National Certificate in Educational Achievement (NCEA) recommended plays. The clear differences between these works provide a stark illustration of the need for diverse playwrights to be represented on NCEA curricula and for plays for high school study to be considered in terms of their impact on young actors. Unfortunately, however, the thesis' analysis shows that as of 2021, the NCEA theatre standards landscape was still profoundly dominated by white, male writers, and many of the topics were bleak.

The thesis then sets about offering creative material to fill this gap, via a collection of five original plays of various lengths that were written with the critical feminist criteria in mind, but also with an intent to provide young actors with a pleasurable, often humorous experience during high school drama. The creative works are set in a fictional world (the 'New Dawns Leadership Camp for Young Boys and Girls') in which patriarchal binaries are exaggerated to the point of absurdity. This functions both to make gender stereotypes inescapably obvious to audiences and cast members, and to render them ridiculous, positioning misogyny as an outdated cliché (represented through the 'rusty closed' character of camp director Irene Steele and her tightly knotted husband Tyson Knots). The camp's highly theatricalised parody of patriarchy presents it as a silly system that demands - and is subject to - critique, scrutiny, and change, thereby offering young people hope that the future can be different.

At the same time, each of the young characters carries an absurdly comic oversized item that represents in some way their inner world, whether personal challenges they face or strengths they have yet to discover. The exaggerated setting and the outsized items interact to show how young people are positioned as objects within and by patriarchy as a social system, yet also function as autonomous individuals with lifeworld trials and inner resources that they can use to navigate their own path. The plays show characters experiencing many of the common situations of high school including friendships, identity, and resistance to parental authority, but doing so with humour and resilience, with the aim to give young actors an experience on stage that is both kind and empowering.

# Part A: Critical Section

## Chapter One: Introduction

This chapter begins with a positioning statement that articulates my motivations and goals for the research and makes clear my lens (and its limitations) for conducting the research. A personal statement is an important part of the validity of the thesis' arguments, given that I use an interpretive critical/creative epistemology: "Because interpretive researchers view social reality as being embedded within and impossible to abstract from their social settings, they 'interpret' the reality through a 'sense-making' process" (Bhattacharjee, n.p.). The personal statement provides transparency as to the standpoint from which my sense-making process throughout the rest of the thesis occurs, as my research tries critically to make sense of, and creatively to intervene in, the world. Braun et al. argue that personal experience of, passion for, and immersion in the subject matter being researched are an advantage for qualitative researchers making sense of interpretive data (as opposed to ideas of distance which characterise positivist research), but my closeness to my topic necessitates giving a detailed overview of the experiences and background I have brought to the research.

The postmodern critique of hegemonic knowledges has resulted in a legitimization of personal experience and other subjugated ways of knowing. Autoethnography, a fusion of autobiography and ethnography, emerges from this turn; it engages an author's personal experience as legitimate data in an exploration of a relevant sociocultural issue. (Ruderman, 248)

Following the positioning section, I outline my research questions and give a brief overview of how the research presented in this thesis addresses those research questions critically and creatively. This is followed by a section detailing the academic frameworks used to create my argument.

### Personal Statement

I have always been interested in writing, and have been drawn to the arts, particularly drama and creative writing, throughout my academic journey. I love writing immersive stories that take readers into a character's head, so they lose track of the outside world. When I was introduced to playwriting and the idea that my stories could be brought to life by an actor and created on stage for an audience of more than just one reader, I fell in love with the spectacle of it. Playwriting creates opportunities for a writer to not only describe their stories but illustrate them using people, who bring their own diverse experiences, interpretations, and understanding to their roles. In that

way, theatre allows a story to become timeless and to grow as it is re-imagined and performed in different settings and by different companies.

My journey with theatre started with my Mum. I've always loved and respected my Mum; she's the one who encouraged me to start drama lessons and she's always had a love of the arts, being a textile designer. She's had the biggest impact on my life. She raised me as a single parent since I was a year old, setting up all sorts of different inspiring and creative activities for me to do as I pottered through my childhood. She'd often set up paints and encourage me to be creative and take up space, on the page, onstage, and in my life.

When I was in primary school, during the creative writing sessions most kids would write a page-long story about how their weekend was, or what they planned to do when they got home. I loved escaping into the worlds I was writing about, so I decided to write a novel about Goldie the cat and her gang of street cat friends (I think it was the storyline of *Pinocchio* with *Aristocats*-inspired characters). I revisited and kept writing that story every creative writing session. It was two-exercise-books long by the end of the year, and my Mum was beyond impressed. One of my clearest memories when my love of writing and drama started to emerge in school was my Mum telling me, "You could be a playwright one day, or a writer for Shortland Street!" She never put limits on my abilities, always encouraged me and pushed me to do the things that were important to me.

When I got to high school, I'd been doing drama and improvisation classes with a local theatre for several years and had met some of my best friends through those classes. However, the theatre lost funding and the classes were eventually shut down. It was at this point that I was introduced to school theatre, in my second year at an all-girls high school.

I remember several of the plays we performed, but the role I personally felt most empowered by was in a play called *Passengers* (Bobrick). I played the 'Bag Lady', a character who had lost everything but was optimistic despite her circumstances. Because she had lost so much, she had extra appreciation for everything that came into her life, even if it was just a piece of rubbish someone had left at a bus stop or a chance encounter with a stranger. For me, with all the other pressures of high school, it was pleasurable and a stress release to be able to take on and channel the perspective of a character who had a positive outlook. My Mum used to ask me, "Why don't you ever study happy things at school?" as I was explaining my history project on the holocaust

or how we were studying global warming in science, so it was rewarding to be able to show her something positive I had been working on.

I was not being graded on my performance as the Bag Lady, as this was during Year 12 or, as I refer to it, 'The Year Everything Happened'. Several weeks before the show, my Mum became ill and was hospitalised. I remember exactly where I was when I got her text message. I expected her to be home that night, but it took two weeks in hospital for them to do tests and identify that she had lesions on her lungs. I didn't really know what that meant. I still wanted to do the performance at school because I liked the character; I was excited to show my Mum something positive I had been working on. Plus, like a lot of drama classes, my classmates and I had developed camaraderie and trust between us; I didn't want to let them down. Unfortunately, it was the last performance of mine that Mum saw. She'd come from having a lung biopsy in Auckland and had gone straight to my show. Nothing in her control would stop her from supporting me. A few weeks later we got the diagnosis of Stage Four lung cancer, metastasised to the brain. Unfortunately, that wasn't in anyone's control.

During that whirlwind time, I had my own health issues; I too was diagnosed with cancer, but according to my doctor, I was lucky – I got a treatable thyroid cancer. This wasn't officially diagnosed until after I'd written my doctor an essay detailing the reasons why I wanted him to do investigative thyroid surgery even though he thought it was only a 5% chance of being cancer. I received a phone call after my first surgery, telling me I'd tested positive for thyroid cancer, and I'd have to go back the next day. My second surgery, to remove my whole thyroid, was also my Mum's last day of radiation. I remember because we were both staying in the cancer ward overnight and I had to organise someone to come and feed our cats. Everything happened in three months, and then at sixteen I was left without her.

I am grateful beyond measure for my Mum. Even though the time I got with her wasn't enough, she raised me to be a strong woman, and to believe that I have what it takes to do the things I want to do. I don't share this part of my story for sympathy or sentimentality, only so you can understand some of my background and see how losing her has made me sensitive to the guiding influences on a child's life. I had to become my own protector. I was not the only student at my school who lost a parent, family member or friend. Mental health struggles were common and many of my classmates were dealing with their own issues outside of school, something that is hard to factor into a busy school environment of grades, essays, and homework. Recent research

into the mental health of young people aged 10-19 has revealed that mental health statistics are worsening, “with 23% of students experiencing ‘significant depressive symptoms,’ an increase from 12% in 2001” (Anderson). Drama classes at high school are not isolated from our lives but interwoven with lifeworld issues that are often stressful, and sometimes terrifying. Everybody at high school is dealing with something.

I left school for a year to recover from everything. I got the all-clear for my cancer in November 2014 and joined a different school in 2015 to re-do year 12. It was at this school that I had some of my most visceral experiences with drama. Like my other drama classes, we soon became close-knit, and this was helped by our drama teacher’s enthusiasm. However, the next year in Year 13 there were some events that changed my perspective on drama and opened my eyes to the ways it can create both positive and negative experiences for students. Up until then my experiences with drama and the roles I played – bag lady, melodrama heroine, schoolteacher, student – were largely positive, and playing them helped me strengthen my responses to my outside-school circumstances. However, in Year 13 we began to study more intense theatre forms and darker subject matter.

In the following section, I provide a personal account of some of the experiences I had in drama classrooms (in the next chapter, I provide wider data to contextualise my personal experiences with others’ views, however I want to begin with my own experiences as it is from these that my motivation for this research has arisen). I would like to make it clear that this section is not a critique of any of my teachers or their abilities. It is a critique of the drama methods and suggested scripts available to teachers and the ways those limit what can happen in the classroom. I have had some of my best experiences at school within drama classes, and my purpose in writing this is not to tear down drama teachers, but to support them in arguing for ways they can have access to more diverse and constructive subject matter for their classes.

One of my first memories of performance in Year 13 was with a girl who had just joined our class. We were studying *The Pohutukawa Tree* (Mason). We were required to perform an extract and told that the greater the intensity, the higher our grade would likely be. We performed a scene where mother and daughter characters are having an argument which culminates in physical violence, with the mother slapping the daughter across the face. When we both approached our teacher and asked if there was a way to stage the slap so that it looked real but didn’t connect, we were told that we were studying realism, and the most realistic way to perform the scene was to

use an actual slap. We were both resistant but also wanted to do well in the class, so we did the slap. We both got good grades. The girl and I ended up becoming friends afterwards, but this was the first experience with drama where I felt the interpretation and the message were inappropriate for the high school context. Why were we, as sixteen-, seventeen- and eighteen-year-olds, taught that we had to realistically embody the characters in these stories, and then given scripts where the characters abused each other or faced dark themes of violence and conflict?

My next experience, arguably the most impactful, was during the unit when we studied Stanislavski method acting. Jean Benedetti describes how Stanislavski believed that theatre's function is,

to civilise, to increase sensitivity, to heighten perception and, in terms perhaps now unfashionable to us, to ennoble the mind and uplift the spirit. The best method of achieving this end was adherence to the principles of Realism. This was more than a question of aesthetic preference or a predilection for one 'style' over other 'styles'. It was a question of asserting the primacy of the human content of theatre over other considerations, of content over form. (Benedetti, 16-17)

Benedetti further describes Stanislavski's book *An Actor Prepares*, saying, "By and large it is a summation of Stanislavski's work between 1906 and 1914, when the emphasis was on the inner process, the psycho-technique" (78). Boal had a critical view of his experience watching an acting company taking on a version of Stanislavski's Method, saying "the determination to remain deeply 'in character' and 'authentic' brought with it qualities of self-absorption, unpredictability, and inconsistency that were not always beneficial to the whole" (Howe, Boal and Soeiro, 17). He argued that "While the Studio's approach—a refinement of that practiced by the Group—had its roots in Stanislavski's teaching, the Method was a narrow and even distorted version of this source. The Group's practices had themselves rested on an incomplete understanding of Stanislavski's principles" (Howe, Boal and Soeiro, 17). While, as I know now, my experience may also not have been an accurate representation of Stanislavski's technique, we were taught to use memories of our past experiences during our performances to channel emotions. Anything new we came across in our lives, any intense memory that had an emotion attached, we were taught to capture it, remember it, and catalogue it away so that we could draw on it later in performances. Though it was said we shouldn't always use our worst or strongest memory, it was

implied that the stronger the intensity of the memory we channelled, the more realistic our performance would be. Some of our teachers appeared unaware that, while an actor's "inner life was indeed an important element for Stanislavski" that was "primarily in the early stages of his work: as Marvin Carlson notes, by 1930 the director's thinking had changed significantly, leading him to place greater importance on study of the text, physical actions, and the 'given circumstances' of characters" (Howe, Boal and Soeiro, 17).

The play we were going to perform an extract from was *Purapurawhetū* (Grace-Smith), and the scene I learned as a monologue involved Kui, an older Māori woman who lives in a coastal community, reliving the experience of watching her son being drowned in the harbour. It was a high-intensity scene, full of grief and loss. I had lost my Mum just over a year before, and so had a lot of grief to draw on.

My Mum left me a journal before she died. It was one of her last projects, and it's one of my most special possessions. It's in her handwriting and reading it upsets me, because I miss her deeply and it reminds me what I've lost and how amazing it would be if she was still here. I was encouraged by my drama teacher to bring the journal with me to school, to draw on it and harness my grief for the character, if I was comfortable. Being an over-achiever at heart, I wanted to push myself and take on what I thought was the Stanislavski Acting Method. I had a free period before drama class, so I booked a private music studio, read the journal and allowed myself to get upset. Then I went to class and held in my tears until my performance. I received a grade of 'Excellence'. Looking back, I can see how that experience changed my thinking around drama and embodying a character. Roles weren't just roles to me any longer, each character had their own experiences and anything they experienced, we as actors would have to take on, relate to, channel, and practise. It would take me several years before I could look back with the wisdom of hindsight and realise that embodying this took a personal toll that I wasn't ready for at age eighteen and had also skewed my thinking around and reaction to intense experiences off stage, in the real world.

Our final year 13 production was *Revenge of the Amazons* (Betts), which is a feminist re-interpretation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Shakespeare). By this time, I had begun to be selective about the roles I auditioned for. Even though this was a feminist play, it still had female characters who did things I felt uncomfortable with. 'The Lovers' – Helena, Hermia, Demetrius, and Lysander – kiss and flirt with their partners. Hermia exposes a breast, Barbara is transformed

into a playboy bunny creature and obsessed over by King Oberon, and Titania and Oberon kiss. I did not want to kiss anyone or expose myself; I'd been in a committed relationship for several years and did not want to invite my boyfriend and his family to my show to watch me kiss some boy in my class or expose a breast. I was fortunate to land the role of Georgina who was the type-A leader of the feminist thespians theatre group. The most uncomfortable thing I had to do on stage was act out "reliving my first period" (with our male principal sitting right in front of me in the audience!) However, the other roles still had to be filled by young women in our class and having spoken to the cast during the show, not all of them had positive experiences with the play, especially those playing some of the roles mentioned earlier. There was no open class invitation to discuss these experiences openly and unpack or process them as part of the teaching of the play (though I wasn't playing one of the characters involved in uncomfortable scenes, and there may have been individual conversations regarding these topics): the focus of the learning objectives in class was on the performance.

I began university at 19 years old and took my first performance paper in second year; our first play was *The Love of the Nightingale* (Wertenbaker). This was the first time I decided not to invite my friends and family to a performance. While it was a well-crafted play, it culminates in a scene where the male villain rapes and cuts out the tongue of the female protagonist. Even though our teacher used the Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*, a technique to distance the actors from their characters and the audience from the narrative while drawing attention to its theatrical making,<sup>1</sup> I felt the production focussed heavily on the mistreatment of the female characters.

Even with the distancing effect it was not a play I felt proud or comfortable inviting my friends and family to watch. I found it psychologically difficult to watch rehearsals of the rape scene and I was not even directly involved. I played a member of the female chorus, whose job was to comment on but not interfere with the tragedy that was unfolding on stage. As chorus members, we experienced a repeated sense of powerlessness, and onstage we were also modelling

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<sup>1</sup> Brecht called for "dissociations between statement and its enunciation, between role and its interpretation, between the referential level of representation (theatrical illusion of realm) and an autoreferential one (where theatre and actor show off their means of expression, their strategies able to make an imaginary world and a certain attitude visible for the audience). Thus Brecht obtained his well-known 'distancing' or 'alienation effect' (*Verfremdungseffekt*), to which he assigned an ideological and socially critic function. [...] Brecht's distanciation effect appears at many levels of performance: action (plot or fabula joining metareferentiality), addresses to the audience, songs, scenery replacements in sight of the audience, gesture, diction, acting, rhythmical discontinuities; in this way, the actor doesn't embody his[sic] character; he[sic] displays it by distancing himself[sic] from it." (Blanariu, 81).

powerlessness to the audience. Boal, founder of the form 'Theatre of the Oppressed' (TO), "opposed divisions between those who listen and those who speak, those who watch and those who act. Such divisions were reproducing in the sphere of theatre the broader divisions of society, and Boal believed audiences could no longer accept being merely spectators of their lives" (Howe, Boal and Soeiro, 1). This focus on including all groups in a theatre production to have input in the performance suggests one way that this form can be empowering to both the actors and the audience. "Through TO, people analyze oppressions, share knowledge with one another, and mobilize the knowledge they already have. Ideally, they collectively mobilize that knowledge to dismantle oppressive systems" (Howe, Boal and Soeiro, 1). However, this was not a technique used in this particular production, which was true to the script. Playing this role was a disempowering experience for me as I felt powerless to change any of the terrible things that were happening to the other female characters. While the message of the play was and still is deeply important, it didn't create happy situations for its female characters onstage.

I hoped, with the second play we performed, that it would be lighter and more shareable subject matter; however, we staged *Punk Rock* (Stephens), a play about a group of stressed-out high school students facing growing pressures of adolescence. The play climaxes when one student becomes a school shooter and kills many of the other students. Again, we were approaching it with Stanislavski method acting techniques. I was one of the students who was shot, and we had blood pack effects, so I performed the whole show with the blood strapped to my chest, knowing I would have to act out my own terror and death in the final scene. My earlier experiences with Stanislavski in high school also coloured my thinking around this show, and I once again began taking more notice when I felt emotions during everyday happenings and started cataloguing them away for future drama use. Though my lecturer did encourage us to use some techniques to distance ourselves from our characters, such as entering the rehearsal space and walking around as our characters (leading with different body parts than we usually would), and doing the same exercise but as ourselves at the close of rehearsal, I found these de-roling techniques would often get my body out of character but not stop my mind from lingering on the character's intense pressures and experiences.

Rob Roznowski describes a similar experience with de-roling techniques in the context of a devised piece for students, "using the 1950s as a springboard to examine racism, homophobia, class warfare, and more. The goal became clear: to use the past to shine a spotlight on the lack of real progress concerning social issues still affecting the country nearly seventy years later"

(Roznowski, 185). He describes the rehearsal process for the actors, wary of the impact that performing a piece dealing with dark themes may have on students. He describes a semi-effective method of de-roling, saying:

It was not a pleasant place as an actor to advocate for the racist, sexist, or homophobic characters they were playing. Lines began to blur and resentment between antagonistic characters and the actual actors became fractious. In response, a ritual was created to transition or step into character and “back in time” at the start of rehearsal and then a similar ceremony at rehearsals’ end. This simple but metaphoric entrance and exit into the show’s themes allayed the examination of such dark material for some, but not all. (Roznowski, 189)

Similar to my own experience, Roznowski describes how, despite this de-roling procedure, “Some actors were unable to leave behind their character’s sinister behaviours or an evening of prejudicial statements being hurled at them. Personal safety could sometimes be compromised when asking them to be actor activists immersed in incendiary subjects. Numerous readings and techniques related to cooling down or de-roling were shared with the actors, but this was still not enough for all” (190). He describes one actor who was significantly affected by the dark themes of the piece, despite the techniques provided:

[T]he actor complained of fear of coming into the performance space (also his theatrical classrooms during the day) because of the trauma he endured the night before. This inability to distance or separate between artist, role, and activist was distressing and caused harm to the actor, as the role appeared to trigger past traumatic events that coincided with the show’s messaging. The student sought assistance with untangling this artistic knot from trained professionals during and after the run of the show. (Roznowski, 191-192)

While this acting group had access to many resources throughout their creative process, many schools are not so well equipped: “McFarren calls upon acting teachers to establish appropriate safeguards in the classroom should a student with a history of trauma become inadvertently triggered by acting exercises, in order to support the mental health and wellbeing of those in training” (Maxwell, Seton and Szabó, 71).

On the night of our second show of *Punk Rock*, I learned just how detrimental my (mis)understanding of the Stanislavski technique had become to me. Research suggests that when acting strategies for connecting emotionally with an assigned character are “activated negatively, the actor’s personal life may supplant the character in performance, leading the actor to lose control onstage. Conversely, the actor’s character may take over offstage, with the actor carrying over character behaviour into everyday life. A consequence of both processes may be emotional distress” (Maxwell, Seton and Szabó, 71). I was harassed at a bus stop on the way to our last performance by a violent man who threatened assault. Instead of responding appropriately, I froze, and I’m embarrassed to admit that in that crucial moment instead of prioritising my safety I thought about how useful the experience would be in channelling fear for dramatic purposes; I’d be able to give a believable performance of terror in that night’s show.

I got away, but instead of performing on stage that night, ended up at the police station where a male police officer spoke to me. He was not empathetic and said that because I had been upset and crying in front of the stranger, I had encouraged him to be violent towards me. I later learned this was victim-blaming behaviour and unfortunately an issue many women face. Looking back, I wish I’d had the confidence to be able to represent myself better to the officer and not just accept his unhelpfulness.

The incident made me think about how many times a woman must learn to represent herself throughout her life, whether it is in an extreme case like asking for help from authorities, or a more common experience like applying for a job, leaving a friendship or relationship, or making a change in her environment to make her situation better. The more I learn about feminism, the more I have begun to recognise the ways our society is set up to create barriers for women, to confine them or make it harder for them to achieve the things they want from life. It is not impossible for women to achieve their diverse goals; however, often women face extra or unseen obstacles to achieving those goals. This is also true when women choose to seek help or support, often they must plead their case and put in extra effort to be taken seriously or listened to. Sometimes even just recognising that they have the right to create better situations for themselves can be difficult because of how prevalent patriarchal and social conditioning is in our society. Confidence is a major factor when representing yourself to others, and drama is an often-touted way to improve confidence. How can we make sure that potential is utilised, especially for young women during their impressionable high school years?

In the opening to her book, *The Authority Gap: Why Women are Still Taken Less Seriously than Men and What we Can do About it*, Sieghart describes an instance where Mary McAleese, President of the Republic of Ireland, led an official visit to the Vatican to meet Pope John Paul II. When it came to time for her to be introduced to the pontiff, “he reached straight past her, held out his hand to her husband and asked him, ‘Would you not prefer to be President of Ireland than married to the President of Ireland?’” (Sieghart, 2). Sieghart uses this as an example of what she describes as ‘The Authority Gap’ between men and women. She says:

This sort of behaviour is incredibly frustrating for women. No one likes to be treated as if they’re inferior, particularly if they’re not. To see this more clearly, it helps to flip things around. So, if you’re a man, I would like you to take a moment or two to do this thought experiment. Imagine living in a world in which you were routinely patronized by women. Imagine having your views ignored or your expertise frequently challenged by them. Imagine trying to speak up in a meeting, only to be talked over by female colleagues. Imagine woman subordinates resisting you as a boss, merely because of your gender. Imagine women superiors promoting other women even if they are less talented than you. Imagine people always addressing the woman you are with before they address you. Imagine writing a book and finding that half the population is reluctant to read it because it is written by a man. Would you just shrug your shoulders and say, ‘Well, that’s fair enough? Men are different from women.’ Or would it infuriate you? (Sieghart, 2-3).

While illuminating the ‘authority gap’ and some of the ways patriarchal influences in our society are set up to value men and their opinions, this also begins to touch on the idea that feminism as a direct reversal of gender expectations is also not a desirable outcome, as Sieghart describes in later chapters. I believe some of the tools that could equip young people to resist and subvert such patriarchal influences and learn to navigate and recognise the patriarchal influences in our society without simply flipping them to enact conflict and power but in the opposite direction, lie within theatre – but such theatre will need to think carefully about how it represents situations of gender, conflict, and authority on stage.

I don’t presume to speak for all young people: I began my Master of Creative Writing degree at age 23 and so now have some eight or more years’ distance from the high school audience.

Additionally, ideas about what is suitable material for young people are disputed: for example, in Aotearoa New Zealand Maurice Gee's YA novel *The Fat Man* sparked heated debate among critics as to its appropriateness, due to the use of explicit language, and themes of family abuse and violence. The novel's release inspired a panel debate featuring four writers of young adult fiction, English author Anne Fine and Aotearoa New Zealand authors Jack Lasenby, Paula Boock, and William Taylor, at the Aotearoa New Zealand Writers and Readers Week events, centred on the question, "Robbing Children of Their Innocence". The overall position of all four writers was that books shouldn't be censored. "While Taylor said he would be happy for his children to read almost anything, the others advocated some parental guidance— but not censorship of the books themselves" (Carpinter, 23). While they were decidedly against censorship of books, they did note the influence of parental guidance and its importance in curating what a young adult reads.

Other significant examples of censored books in Aotearoa New Zealand include the YA novel, *Into the River*, (Dawe), which sparked controversy when it was released due to the mature and dark nature of its themes. In 2015, the novel "was reclassified four times during which process it was placed under an Interim Restriction Order" (Meffan, 2016, 82), "the first book to be placed under an interim ban since the Film, Video and Publications Classification act, 1993 had come into effect 22 years earlier" (Meffan, 2017, 92). The censorship and controversy around these novels have been a catalyst in raising discussion within the Young Adult fiction-writing community about the impact on youth of reading novels that include themes more appropriate for an older age group. Many other critics were passionate that even though Maurice Gee's novel centred around a young adult protagonist, it may be detrimental for a young person to read, due to the dark and adult nature of its themes. The point was also raised that because the novel is written in first person, it allows the reader to experience the protagonist's journey on a closer and more personal level, meaning that the intense scenes of violence and conflict could be even more upsetting for a young adult reader.

Many parents believe that children's exposure to dark themes should be moderated; however, Bettelheim suggests that "Presenting some polarities of character [like good and evil] allows the child to comprehend easily the difference between the two, which he[sic] could not do as readily were the figures drawn more true to life, with all the complexities that characterize real people" (9). Bettelheim describes the prevalent parental belief that a child should be steered away from what troubles them most: their "formless, nameless anxieties" and "chaotic, angry and even

violent fantasies”. He describes how, often, “parents believe that only conscious, reality or pleasant and wish-fulfilling images should be presented to the child” and that they should only “be exposed to the sunny side of things” (Bettelheim, 7).

However, Bettelheim argues that “such one-sided fare nourishes the mind only in a one-sided way, and real life is not all sunny” (7). I agree with this view but would clarify to say that just as overly positive stories provide one-sided nourishment, overly negative stories are also one-sided, and are also not as beneficial to the child. While I acknowledge that there are some arguments for the benefit of exposing children to dark themes and material through literature, I am arguing here that there also needs to be acknowledgement of the benefit of consuming empowering pieces of media, especially if they are written specifically with young people’s development in mind.

Bettelheim suggests that elements that can make a story engaging to a child and arouse their curiosity include stimulating the imagination, developing intellect, clarifying emotions, remaining attuned to the child’s anxieties and aspirations, giving recognition to their difficulties, and suggesting solutions to their problems. He argues that stories must relate to all aspects of young people’s personalities (positive and negative), “without ever belittling” and by “giving full credence to the seriousness of the child’s predicaments, while simultaneously promoting confidence in [themselves and their] future” (Bettelheim, 5).

Bettelheim asserts that fairy tales are successful at “enriching the inner life of the child” (6) because the stories “start where the child really is in [their] psychological and emotional being. They speak about [their] severe inner pressures in a way that the child unconsciously understands, and – without belittling the most serious inner struggles which growing up entails – offer examples of both temporary and permanent solutions to pressing difficulties” (6).

Bettelheim challenges the views of parents who believe children should not be told that “the source of much that goes wrong in life is due to our very own nature – the propensity of all men[sic] for acting aggressively, asocially, selfishly, out of anger and anxiety” (7). He complicates this parental view by suggesting that:

we want our children to believe that, inherently, all men[sic] are good. But children know that they are not always good; and often, even when they are, they would prefer not to be. This contradicts what they are told by their

parents, and therefore makes the child a monster in his[sic] own eyes.  
(Bettelheim, 7)

Instead, Bettelheim promotes fairy tales as an opportunity for a child to develop their inner world, as “when unconscious material is to some degree permitted to come to awareness and worked through in imagination, its potential for causing harm – to ourselves or to others – is much reduced; some of its forces can then be made to serve positive purposes” (Bettelheim, 7).

There have been arguments that literature for young adults needs to be dark in order to teach them to survive in the world but historian and writer Rutger Bregman argues that the world is not as dark as much literature makes out. Bregman explains how we are often shown a negative or pessimistic view of the world through the media, films, documentaries, and literature; however, he proposes a new, more optimistic view. He draws on psychologist Robert Sapolsky to argue for a fresh perspective, explaining how “In children, the correlation between seeing violent images and aggression in adulthood is stronger than the correlation between asbestos and cancer, or between calcium intake and bone mass” (Sapolsky qtd in Bregman, 37). Bregman argues that “cynical stories have an even more marked effect on the way we look at the world” (37), and asserts that, “It’s time we told a different kind of story” (38). My own experiences have led me to agree with this view. Not only is it not helpful to insist that young people must explore intensely dark themes in literature, media, and theatre, but Bregman suggests it also doesn’t reflect the world we live in.

Bregman uses the example of the well-known survival novel, *Lord of the Flies* (Golding), which tells the story of a group of British schoolboys becoming stranded on a deserted island and forming their own society, to explain how, often cynical stories are popularised over more positive stories. In the novel, the result of the boys being left to their own devices without adult supervision, is that chaos ensues. They begin as a democratic society with the goals, “1) Have fun. 2) Survive. 3) Make smoke signals for passing ships. Number one is a success. The others? Not so much” (22). The boys become increasingly reckless, though, “Piggy is the voice of reason, which nobody listens to” (23) and “when a ship does finally pass in the distance, they’ve abandoned their post at the fire” (22). Eventually, “a British naval officer comes ashore. The island is now a smouldering wasteland. Three of the children, including Piggy, are dead” (23). This is a fictional story, but it has been widely popularised, making its way into school reading lists and libraries. It “would ultimately sell tens of millions of copies, be translated into more than

thirty languages and be hailed as one of the classics of the twentieth century” (23). Bregman attributes this success to Golding’s “masterful ability to portray the darkest depths of mankind” (23).

Bregman compares this pessimistic fictional novel to a real-life example of six Tongan boys who went on a fishing trip. “Caught in a huge storm, the boys were shipwrecked on a deserted island. What do they do, this little tribe? They made a pact to never quarrel” (25-6). Contrary to Golding’s novel, these boys developed their own functional community on the tiny island of Ata, where they were marooned for more than a year before being rescued by an Australian sea captain. Bregman interviews the sea captain, Peter Warner, who remained friends with many of the boys more than 50 years later; he recalls, “the boys had set up a small commune with food garden, hollowed-out tree trunks to store rainwater, a gymnasium with curious weights, a badminton court, chicken pens and a permanent fire, all from handiwork, an old knife blade and much determination” (32). Bregman points out that, “While the boys in the make-believe *Lord of the Flies* come to blows over the fire, those in the real-life *Lord of the Flies* tended their flame so it never went out, for more than a year” (33).

The real-life shipwrecked boys found creative ways to maintain their friendship and create community among themselves, without giving in to anger, frustration or violence. They created work teams, drew up rosters for gardening, cooking, and monitoring their fire, and managed their emotions.

Sometimes they quarrelled, but whenever that happened they solved it by imposing a time-out. The squabblers would go to the opposite ends of the island to cool their tempers, and, ‘After four hours or so,’ Mano later remembered, ‘we’d bring them back together. Then we’d say “Okay, now apologize.” That’s how we stayed friends.’ (Bregman, 33).

This real-life example of *Lord of the Flies* is a heart-warming story of friendship fraught in survival, one that offers much more hope for humankind than the story told by Golding. Bregman shows how stories of hope exist, and asserts, “if we’re going to make *Lord of the Flies* required reading for millions of teenagers, then let’s also tell them about the time real kids found themselves stranded on a desert island. ‘I used their survival story in our social studies classes,’ one of the boys’ teachers at St Andrew’s High School in Tonga recalled years later. ‘My students couldn’t get enough of it,’” (38). Bregman asserts that stories of hope and positivity can be

beneficial to anyone, especially when our society tends to sensationalise the negatives over good news.

In this thesis I explore how these concepts can be applied to drama. Performing theatre is a much more intimate form of creative engagement than reading a novel or short story as the actor must embody the character, and live their experiences on a much more visual and visceral level, which is why I suggest that there should be a similar level of care, or at least an awareness by playwrights who produce work for young adults to perform, of the issues that may be potentially detrimental to a developing youth, and those that are empowering and help build confidence and life skills. As Bettelheim suggests, a story should be relatable and treat the issues the characters are facing with seriousness, while promoting confidence and hope for the future for those who experience it (5). In my playwriting I wanted to experiment with ways that theatre can be an empowering experience for young people, and support drama teachers by making creative resources available that may offer more positive experiences for young people in their classrooms. A range of materials may be useful, but my own experiences and research both suggest there is a gap for plays that provide more positive roles for students to perform.

Theatre can benefit students, especially in terms of confidence, by allowing them to learn skills from the experiences of the characters they play on stage. As psychiatrist Bessel Van der Kolk describes:

Our sense of agency, how much we feel in control, is defined by our relationship with our bodies and its rhythms: Our waking and sleeping and how we eat, sit, and walk define the contours of our days. In order to find our voice, we have to be in our bodies—able to breathe fully and able to access our inner sensations. This is the opposite of dissociation, of being “out of body” and making yourself disappear. It's also the opposite of depression, lying slumped in front of a screen that provides passive entertainment. Acting is an experience of using your body to take your place in life. (Van der Kolk, 331)

Therefore, there is potential for the study of theatre in schools to promote healthy ways of navigating social roles, including gender, by teaching students to take their place in life by first using theatre to allow them an experience of what that would look like. This allows students to create a muscle-memory of healthy behaviour and may teach them coping mechanisms that could

be useful later in life. With the current mental-health pandemic among young people in Aotearoa New Zealand reaching crisis point, I believe we need to find more positive, hopeful ways to teach theatre, and I want to contribute by offering a pathway towards kinder practice in theatre.

I am now 25 years old as I near the end of my journey towards an MCW qualification, but I still carry with me the impact of experiences (both positive and negative) from high school drama classes: theatre is a powerful teacher and leaves a lasting impact on young people. I have told these personal stories both as illustrative material because I know I am not alone in these kinds of experiences, as demonstrated in the interviews in the next chapter, and because they were the fire that fuelled this research and they have heavily shaped my research goals and questions. The research perspective has also been informed by a literature review of relevant feminist theatre theory, key findings from which are summarised below.

### Feminist Theory/ Academic Context:

The first hurdle I reached in this research was creating a working definition of the term ‘feminism’, as it is one that has been picked up and moved in many directions by many different groups. When I was first introduced to the word, someone at school suggested that feminists burned their bras and didn’t shave their legs. It wasn’t until later, when I encountered the word again in an academic context that I was able to expand my understanding. Recognising that the young people I am writing for may also have a limited understanding of what feminism is, I wanted to ground my playwriting in a scholarly understanding of a feminism that is contemporary, multifaceted, and specifically related to theatre, without making the plays themselves seem ‘academic’.

One of the first pivotal texts specifically relating to feminism in a theatrical context is Sue Ellen-Case’s *Feminism in Theatre*, first published in 1988 and re-issued in 2008 with a foreword by Elaine Aston. In her opening paragraph, Aston explains the importance of the text in feminist history and that “histories are vital to futures” (Aston, ix). Case’s text was one of the first to apply a feminist lens specifically to theatre, re-examining histories and canonical texts with an inclusive view that is sceptical of what has been left out or misrepresented. Case not only begins to trace the relationships between feminism and theatre throughout history, offering new perspectives on canonical or classic texts and how they mirror the patriarchal values of the time and looking beyond the stage to find the female pioneers of performance who were not recorded in the history

books, but she also begins to describe a critical framework and process of feminist analysis that offer valuable insights into feminist theatre aesthetics and the future of feminism and theatre. Her later chapters also offer an understanding of several key positions of feminism, explaining how “A basic list might include radical feminism (sometimes called cultural feminism), liberal feminism, materialist feminism, socialist feminism, Marxist feminism, lesbian feminism, radical lesbian feminism, critical positions such as psychosemiotic feminist criticism, and *l’écriture féminine* (an application of French feminism)” (Case, 63). She explains how many feminist critics embrace a combination of these different positions, which reassured me in my own position and understanding of feminism.

The working definition I use in this thesis is influenced by radical, materialist, and intersectional feminisms. Case describes radical feminism as “the belief that the patriarchy is the primary cause of the oppression of women” (Case, 64). She describes patriarchy as “the system which elevates men to positions of power [...] placing men in an economic and social executive position within the family unit, the market place and the state. The patriarchy represents all systems of male dominance and is regarded as the root of most social problems” (Case, 64). I believe, as do many contemporary scholars of gender, that the patriarchy is problematic not only for women but for all genders.

In the opening to her essay, “Feminist Politics: Where We Stand”, bell hooks describes how in her words, “Simply put, feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression. This was a definition of feminism I offered in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. [...] It was my hope at the time that it would become a common definition everyone would use. I liked this definition because it did not imply that men were the enemy” (1). She goes on to explain that sexism is not just a problem for women as “most people do not understand sexism, or if they do, they think it is not a problem. Masses of people think that feminism is always and only about women seeking to be equal to men. And a huge majority of these folks think feminism is anti-male. Their misunderstanding of feminist politics reflects the reality that most folks learn about feminism from patriarchal mass media” (1). To hooks, feminism by definition “is not about being anti-male. It makes it clear that the problem is sexism. And that clarity helps us remember that all of us [...] have been socialised from birth on to accept sexist thought and action” (hooks, vii). Chimimanda Ngozi Adichie, a Nigerian feminist writer, describes her own definition of a feminist as anyone “who says, ‘Yes, there’s a problem with gender as it is today, and we must fix it. We must do better’” (29:37-29:50). I believe theatre can

also ‘do better’ by offering valuable perspectives to help young people recognise sexist/patriarchal influences in the world they live in and learn to resist them by experiencing the actions of empowering characters who may also act as role models.

Patriarchy, of course, is also entwined with capitalism, and Case uses materialist feminism as an umbrella term to encompass elements of Marxist feminism and socialist feminism, describing how “class determines the situation of all people within capitalism” (Case, 82). She argues that:

Class is a hierarchical structure in which the owners of the means of production garner their privileges through the oppression of the workers. The definitive role that class plays in social organisation means that there are crucial differences between upper-middle-class and working-class-women – not only are all women not sisters, but the women in the privileged classes actually oppress women in the working class. (Case, 83)

She goes on to describe a ‘gender-neutral’ quality related to materialist analysis, which some have deemed problematic and at odds with feminism. Some radical feminist critics have suggested that the “‘unhappy marriage’ between materialism and feminism” (Case, 83) is at odds with feminist consciousness when notions of class and production aren’t represented by patriarchal institutions. Case also raises the point that it creates “mythical bridges between men and women of the same class and mythical divides between women of different classes” (Case, 84). This idea of different factors such as class impacting women in varying degrees in the journey towards equality begins to touch on the notion of intersectional feminism.

Intersectional feminism is a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. In a 2020 interview she described intersectionality as:

a lens, a prism, for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other. We tend to talk about race inequality as separate from inequality based on gender, class, sexuality or immigrant status. What’s often missing is how some people are subject to all of these, and the experience is not just the sum of its parts. (Crenshaw qtd in Steinmetz)

Crenshaw explains how different factors of oppression can cause division and misunderstanding among women, because how one woman may perceive gendered experiences can be heavily

impacted by a multitude of factors, each having influence in their own individual way, causing women's experiences to be vastly different from each other. While we cannot live the lives of other women in order to understand their experiences in as visceral a way as they can themselves, we can offer empathy, and we can make space for the different intersectional groups to each have their own voice. Theatre and other forms of representation can contribute here, in giving voice to different experiences and insight into the lives of others.

I believe it is paramount in my own playwriting to focus on how I can make positive changes that do not exacerbate the differences and inequality between genders but instead focus on how we can create better systems that will allow all people to feel encouraged and empowered. Case touches on this idea when referencing critic Jill Dolan, in the context of explaining how lesbian critics are creating a new lesbian theatre aesthetic:

According to Dolan, traditional drama is based on the concept of oppositional genders. Playing with such cultural idioms as "opposites attract", traditional texts exhibit a form that depends on the resolution of differences or the creation of alliances between opposites, such as the convention of ending plays with the institution of heterosexual marriage, a device which combines the oppositional mode with the enforcement of compulsory heterosexuality. Dolan notes that this aesthetic is not suitable to a single-gender, or homosexual, experience. The questions Dolan raises could lead to a new aesthetic. What would theatre be like if it were distanced from cultural oppositions? What kind of form would result from a focus on similarity? What could constitute dramatic action outside of conflict? What would constitute character outside of cultural gender? Dolan's questions about a lesbian aesthetic could prove to be central to any notion of feminist theatre. (Case, 81)

I am particularly interested in the application of these questions to creating feminist theatre that is empowering and appealing to introduce young actors to ideas of feminism through theatre. How can we create drama that helps teach young people how to interact in ways that allow them to unlearn the harmful patriarchal oppositions and ideas that have been perpetuated throughout our history? My argument here is that deconstruction of gender stereotypes may be most helped not by acting out yet another tragedy of oppression but by showing how we could live in a world without it, that focuses on celebrating diversity, accepting difference, making connections, and

coming to agreement, rather than on rehearsing conflict, even if that world is only created on stage.

In the foreword to *Feminism and Theatre*, Aston argues that:

If feminism ‘begins’ anywhere, it begins with feelings of exclusion: with the growing awareness that women’s social and cultural lives and activities have been overlooked, marginalised, and trivialised by male dominated social systems and cultural values. It was this sense of exclusion that for feminist scholars working in theatre studies in the 1980s fuelled the desire to see women’s theatre included, rather than excluded from the syllabus. (Aston, xi)

This may be the origin that sparked the need for feminism to impact theatre, but it is not the end of the journey. The goals of feminism have been adapted as awareness grows and times change. In this thesis my aim has been to turn my focus to the goals of feminism for a new generation and include all genders and all people in creating a shared understanding of how the patriarchal systems of oppression have impacted us, focussing on how we can move towards a world where everyone can feel represented truthfully, and have the same opportunities in theatre.

My position within feminism thus focuses on empowering all young people regardless of gender, class, race, or other factors, to work towards a world where we focus on inclusion, learning from each other’s experiences, and encouraging each other’s strengths, whatever they may be, regardless of gender stereotypes, expectations, or misrepresentations. The stories I create in my playwriting aim to model ways to support each other in un-learning the harmful systems of oppression that alter the way we interact with each other and the world and building shared understanding. I think theatre is a place where we can make gender oppression visible and offer young people strategies to subvert and resist harmful gender views through the actions the characters perform on stage.

To suggest a range of positive role models, each young character in my plays has some hopeful or redemptive aspect to their outcome at the end of the play, especially if they face difficult or complex challenges earlier. Part of my writing methodology uses an adapted bildungsroman or coming of age structure, as one that is especially relatable to young adults. Brown argues that,

most critics agree that the majority of texts which feature approximately fifteen- to eighteen-year-old protagonists are concerned with identity

formation and development. This is commonly referred to as a ‘coming-of-age’ or bildungsroman narrative, a tale which encompasses adolescence, education, apprenticeship, and any other texts in which a protagonist demonstrates ‘growing up’.” (Brown qtd by Taylor, 8)

Like the main character in a bildungsroman, young adults must also navigate challenges in new environments as they mature and learn how to emerge victorious. Bildungsroman stories are a particularly popular technique in young adult novels, because of their ability to teach young people about new environments through the learned second-hand experience of the protagonist in the novel. With this logic, theatre may be an even more effective medium through which young people can learn about the new environments and experiences they may face as they grow older and navigate into maturity, as acting is arguably a more personal and visceral experience for a young adult who must take on the character they are playing and allow themselves to live the character’s experiences. Hughes and Wilson’s findings support this as they found in their research on the impact of youth theatre on young people’s personal and social development, that,

Many of the accounts provided by young people clearly show that they feel the skills and capacities developed within youth theatre transfer to an increased sense of competence in other areas of their lives, in particular, in their ability to successfully interact with peers, teachers and other adults and their ability to perform comfortably and effectively in a range of unfamiliar and familiar environments (Hughes and Wilson, 63).

A bildungsroman piece of theatre could thus be an empowering experience for a young actor, if there were a relevant protagonist role. “Real and fictional characters portrayed via the various media formats are often said to act as role models for young people” (MacCallum and Beltman, 31). Burke’s research on what makes an effective role model highlights that, “Often role models are selected because of the way in which they have overcome particular barriers seen as relevant by the users. The role models’ behaviours are examined for guidance as to what is appropriate for particular organisations, for the level aspired to by the user, and relevance for the particular culture and context within which users are building their identity” (Singh et al., 68). This emphasises how role-model figures need to feature relatable traits to the audience for audience members to learn from their behaviour.

Bildungsroman stories are generally an empowering experience for the protagonist, as by definition within a bildungsroman, the protagonist must experience growth. Taylor uses Buckley's definition of the qualities of a bildungsroman, saying that they must include most of the following:

the influence of childhood, familial conflict, leaving home, self-education, love affairs, and the search for an occupation, a working philosophy, and eventual integration. By the time the protagonist has arrived at this integration following painful soul-searching he [sic] has left adolescence behind, and is now able to visit the home he [sic] left at the beginning of the novel, where he demonstrates by his presence the degree of his success. (Buckley qtd by Taylor, 9)

Buckley's definition, though it is accepted by most critics, references a male protagonist which highlights another problem with the bildungsroman genre – it largely features masculine protagonists, while the feminine characters are portrayed with less depth or agency. “The need for protagonists to claim agency and assert their power is paramount in young adult texts because it helps the reader [or actor] learn to claim her own power and agency” (McDonough, 4).

Allowing young women to feel represented and empowered in the theatre they watch and plays they perform is important, because too often it is the masculine character who goes through the empowering quest in a bildungsroman, while the feminine characters are side lined, under-developed or there only to aid the main character. In a secondary school drama setting many young women or non-binary students may miss out on the opportunity to play developed and empowering characters, and therefore may miss out on some of the confidence building opportunities that performing theatre has to offer.

So how can we evaluate a piece of theatre through a feminist young adult lens to ensure that it creates empowering experiences for young women who act in it? Many theorists have created different academic frameworks to start the conversation about feminine representation in the media; however, as none of these frameworks focus specifically on young adult representation in theatre, I will be borrowing terms from theorists within different disciplines to develop my own typology for empowering feminist theatre for young people.

One of the first and most well-known tests of women's representation in film is the Bechdel Test. The Bechdel Test is a concept that is primarily used to evaluate women's presence in films (Selisker, 505). Christa van Raalte explains that the Bechdel test started:

as a joke in cartoonist Alison Bechdel's comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*. It was the subject of a 1985 episode titled 'The Rule', in which a woman tells her friend that for her to watch a film it has to meet three conditions. It has to have (1) at least two women in it (2) who talk to each other (3) about something besides a man (Bechdel qtd by van Raalte, 16).

If the film or piece of media passes these three conditions, then it can be considered to have passed the Bechdel Test. If the answer to any of these questions is no, then it may suggest that either the film does not contain female representation, or that the females shown within it are not complex representations of women and may only be there to serve their male counterparts in the story. "Allison Bechdel has credited the test to her friend Wallace, who was inspired by Virginia Woolf's essay *A Room of One's Own* [...] Virginia Woolf observed that the relationships of women in fiction are far too simple and are shown always in their relationship to men" (Chys, 1). The Bechdel Test helps to illuminate these simplistic representations of women by providing clear and comparable criteria through which a text can be judged.

However, van Raalte argues that "male film critics and feminist writers alike have been inclined to dismiss the [Bechdel] test as simplistic, reductive or irrelevant" (18). She observes that "The objections are, almost exclusively, predicated on the things the test is not" (18). She then specifies that the Bechdel test is not a test of film quality, nor can it be used to evaluate the feminist credentials of a film. Her distinctions are important because many popular films that fail the Bechdel Test are still considered quality films, by critics and viewers alike, and many films that do pass the test can still show women in a negative way and perpetuate stereotypical ideas. It is important to note that the Bechdel Test only measures women's presence and does not evaluate the nature of feminine representation, meaning that a film may pass the Bechdel Test but still not have positive representations of women. Therefore, other models of analysis are needed to evaluate the representation of women in a play, and assess how empowering it is for young people learning drama to perform.

Chys explains how Laura Mulvey developed the theory of the 'male gaze' which describes, "the way that women are seen on film and in literature [...] often from the perspective of the

heterosexual male, thereby presenting women as passive and as objects of pleasure” (Chys, iv). Soloway expands on this by suggesting that “the male gaze is the way in which visual arts and literature depict the world and women from a masculine point of view, presenting women as objects of male pleasure” (2.23-2.53). The gaze is constructed in three ways: “by the person behind the camera, the characters in the film, and the spectator” (2.23-2.53). This definition points to the mutual agreement between these three groups, that allows such representations of women to be so widely perpetuated in the media. Often this leads to under-developed female characters in films, who are there mostly for the visual pleasure they provide to male spectators, rather than what they contribute to the narrative.

Soloway poses an interesting question when they ask, if that is the male gaze, then “what is the female gaze?” They go on to explain why taking the polar opposite of the male gaze as a definition for the female gaze is problematic, saying a version of *that* female gaze would be if we were, “offered, like, ladies, here’s your fireman calendar. Are you happy now? No. We are not happy now. I do not want my fireman calendar, okay” (6.43-6.54). Soloway suggests that there needs to be another, more nuanced definition:

I think the female gaze might be a way of feeling seeing. So it could be thought of as a subjective camera, one that attempts to get inside the protagonist, particularly when, but not always [...] when the protagonist is not a [...] cis-male. It uses the frame to share and evoke a feeling of being in feeling rather than looking at characters. So I can take the camera and use it to say to my audience, I’m not just showing you this thing; I want you to feel it with me. (17.34-18.07)

Soloway goes on to say that “part of the female gaze is a socio-political justice demanding way of art making” (23.53-24.04). I agree with Soloway, in that the female gaze is less about the visual portrayal of the subject and more about allowing the spectator to empathise and connect with the subject by feeling their circumstances, emotions and perspective. Much like film, theatre has immense potential to create opportunities for the audience to feel the situation of the character, much like the actor may also connect with and ‘feel’ the character as they are performing them.

To move beyond the Bechdel test's exclusive focus on gender and consider race as an additional disenfranchising factor, Clarkisha Kent, a Nigerian-American writer and cultural critic, developed the Kent Test:

a media litmus test designed to determine whether a film or any other piece of media has provided the audience with thoughtful representation of Black women and/or women of color. Its purpose is to encourage discussion on what good representation can look like for these groups and it is not the 'be-all and end-all' of media criticism. Rather, it is to be used as a starting point. (The Updated Kent Test, 2022)

The test includes a series of requirements, and with each requirement the piece of media scores a point. Those requirements can be summarised as ensuring that the media includes a woman or femme of colour who must:

- not be a walking stereotype or trope.
- have their own plot or narrative arc.
- not be solely included in the narrative just for the purpose of "holding down" a masculine character and his story.
- not solely be included in the narrative to prop up a White woman character.
- not solely exist in the film/piece of media for the purpose of fetishization.
- have at least one interaction with another Black woman or woman of color.
- not be the go-to "sacrifice" character (who is killed or injured saving other--implied more important-- characters from harm) in a film/piece of media.

Depending on the number of points a piece of media gains, it can earn a rating of strong, sound, middling to fair, pathetic, or abysmal representation for Black women and/or women of colour. This test is important, as it gives a framework that allows a much closer critical view of the representation of a specific group of people within a piece of media than the Bechdel Test; however, for my own context, I needed to adapt and extend it to create my own framework that was specific to my research questions, which relate to analysing pieces of theatre with a feminist lens in terms of the roles created for high school students and the attitudes portrayed about gender.

## Research goals and questions

My intention in this research is to support high school teachers in providing positive, enjoyable, and empowering feminist roles for students to play, and to help build students' confidence so that they may draw on the experiences they have had within the safe environment of a drama classroom and be empowered to be more confident in their lives outside and after school.

I am using 'women' 'feminine' and 'femme' inclusively to mean any woman-or-fem-identifying or nonbinary young person, and 'men', 'masculine' and 'masc' to mean any male-or-masc-identifying or nonbinary young person. I am using 'feminist' inclusively to mean any critical interrogation of the harm caused by inflexible patriarchal categories of gender, including harm to men. Thus, while an overarching research goal is to add more roles for young women (both cis and trans) to the canon, I also intend my plays to support young people of any gender to have a positive and affirming high school drama experience. I am also using the word 'actor' inclusively to mean all genders who perform a role within a play. I have not used the binary identifiers female or male unless a play or text has specified these terms.

My overarching research question is: how can a critical/creative exploration of feminist models of empowerment help me to write plays that will empower young actors and avoid gender stereotypes?

Within this, my sub-questions are:

- Why is this research necessary and why am I the right person to be writing about it?
- Who are some of the key academics within feminist theatre theory and what key contributions have they made that provide insight into representation of young women and can benefit the process of creating strong empowering roles for young women within a theatrical play?
- What is the 'big picture' of the social and gender landscape being represented in the selection of plays suggested for high school drama performance standards in Aotearoa? How are feminine characters represented within this selection?
- What traits would a play need to be considered empowering and beneficial to young people learning about feminism through drama?
- When analysed in depth, how does a smaller selection of NCEA plays compare to the Bechdel Test, the Kent test and criteria inspired by my own research?

- How can I create a piece of interesting young adult theatre with roles that possess feminist qualities, that would be relevant for young people in secondary school to explore in a drama setting, so that the actors who play the roles feel empowered, grow in confidence and learn life skills that may help them in future situations, while maintaining a balance of provocative and empowering themes and situations appropriate for a young adult audience?

I address these questions and goals through three critical chapters and a creative section. This chapter has provided an introduction that explains my research positionality, including the challenging experiences of high school drama that made me feel driven to conduct this research. After outlining my research lens, I gave an overview of my primary research goal—which is to investigate critically and creatively how best to provide empowering, gender-inclusive role models in plays for young people to perform in high school. I provided a brief overview of the academic context of my research, summarising key contributions made by feminist theorists and the importance of feminist works and their impact towards changing patriarchal culture and moving our culture more towards empowering young people, young women in particular. I also touched on theory relating to the impact of reading darkly themed literature on young people. While I acknowledged some dark subject-matter can be beneficial for young people, I also argued that the same exposure needs to be given to literature that empowers young people, especially in a form such as theatre which often requires the actor to embody a character in performance.

In the next chapter, to develop my understanding of how young people feel about gender issues in theatre, and to develop my own typology of play features that would be relevant to them, I go beyond the academic literature to collect original data. I begin by briefly explaining my methodology and summarising the results of a semi-structured anonymous questionnaire that I conducted to gain insight about young people's experiences of high school drama. I then compare my results with my own experiences to provide a broader idea of what studying drama at high school in Aotearoa New Zealand can feel like for students. This data then feeds into my developing list of requirements for feminist playwriting.

In Chapter Three, I use this theory and research data in combination with information I have collected on plays suggested for study in high school to create a 'big picture' overview of plays currently suggested for NCEA students in secondary schools in NZ to perform. I examine categories including: how many roles for each gender? How many lead roles for women? What is

the topic area of the play? What era was the play written? and What is the ethnicity/ location of the playwright? Overall, I argue that there are not enough plays on the suggested list that deal with positive subject matter, that are written by women, that offer substantial feminine roles, or that were written recently. I also found many common negative themes such as death, violence, war, family issues, suicide, and abuse. There were some positive themes noted, but in comparison, I found that many of the plays dealt with dark, overly negative themes. I then sum up with some overall insight into the current snapshot of plays recommended as part of the NCEA drama program and how the social and gender landscape they are representing to young people in Aotearoa New Zealand could be improved by including plays that explore more positive subject-matter and offer more roles for young women and gender diverse young people.

Then, I examine in depth two plays that are suggested for secondary school students in Aotearoa New Zealand to perform, *Children of the Poor* (Thompson) and *Wednesday to Come* (Renée), using the question framework informed by feminist theory mentioned above to critique the roles provided for young women and the potential for the play to provide empowering or disempowering roles and situations for young actors. I found that while *Children of the Poor* offered theatrical potential, the story was centred around a male protagonist and the situations that the characters were put into could not be considered empowering for an actor to play. While *Wednesday to Come* dealt with similarly dark themes, the focus of the play was on how each of the characters coped and encouraged each other to cope in healthy ways, with the traumatic event that happened in their family. These plays provide detailed examples of ways to write for the theatre that can either empower and include, or stereotype and demean, particular characters, especially by gender.

The final part of the thesis is a collection of my own theatrical works, inspired by this research journey. They are written for young audiences (aged approximately 12-15, so encompassing middle school and the early years of high school) and aim to create strong, empowering, feminist roles that create opportunities for young actors to grow their own confidence and life skills as they perform. Throughout the thesis and the playwrighting, the definition of 'feminist' that is deployed is an inclusive, intersectional one, meaning that the plays acknowledge that patriarchal representations can harm all genders (not just women) and therefore aim to create role models for young people that empower all genders to avoid stereotyping. The plays are set in a world where every character has to carry a large or cumbersome item with them, and each follows a different group of young people as they attend a holiday camp. As each play progresses the characters

learn to manage their items, some even learn to benefit from them. The plays feature diverse characters who each have their own goals, and struggle with different obstacles – often related to the items they carry. Through the construction of this world, I aim to both entertain and empower young actors and audiences to recognise patriarchal influences and resist them, while providing roles that promote healthy interactions, healthy coping mechanisms, a positive outlook, and an enjoyable experience in the high school drama classroom.

We are living in an unprecedented time, where the mental-health crisis for young people in Aotearoa New Zealand is getting worse. A newspaper article published in November 2022 describes how, “three-quarters of young Kiwis felt stressed and unable to cope in the past year, with 40% saying they have seriously considered suicide or self-harm” (Harris, 4-5). We need to consider how we can make positive changes in the lives of young people. I am asking educators and playwrights to be kinder in their playwriting and the scripts they use than has ever been the practice, because we are in a situation that is unprecedented, and so we all need to think about doing things differently than we have done them before.

## Chapter Two: Research on Experiences of High School Drama Studies

### Introduction

For this research, I wanted to include insights about high school drama that were wider than my own autoethnographic experiences, to help flesh out my list of feminist role model characteristics. I interviewed seventeen people over the age of 18 who had studied drama in high school and, using a semi-structured questionnaire, asked them about their experiences. I wanted to include anonymised experiences from students who had previously been part of a high school drama program and use them to expand and compare with my own experiences of high school drama, to provide a more detailed and expanded view of the high school drama experience. I used the interview questionnaire to explore whether there is an opportunity to provide more developed, positive, gender-inclusive roles within plays commonly used for high school performance and was interested to see how the interviewees offered anecdotes that supported or disproved this idea. I was also interested in identifying some of the effects playing certain kinds of roles may have had for some students. None of the interviewees were currently at high school age – I was interested in how people reflected on their high school experiences with the benefit of some distance and maturity, when they were no longer in a power relationship with their high school drama teacher.

### Methodology

I used purposive sampling, more specifically criterion sampling, to recruit participants for my survey. Purposive sampling means that the researcher has chosen the participants of their study due to specifications that relate to their research goal. Criterion sampling “involves searching for cases or individuals who meet a certain criterion, for example, that they have a certain disease or have had a particular life experience” (Given, 699). My survey had the criteria that participants be over 18 and have the life experience of studying drama in high school. “Purposive sampling is virtually synonymous with qualitative research” (Given, 698). Qualitative research means the research collects non-numerical data, or as Suter puts it, “The orientation of qualitative researchers [...] thinking generates questions that are answered with an emergent methodology, and their approach to rich sources of data requires creativity for its analysis” (343). This means

qualitative researchers ask questions that are answered with words and descriptions, rather than numbers, and the results can be used to understand opinions, concepts, or experiences, give insight into a problem or a success, or inspire new areas for research. However, they require some creativity in interpretation by the researcher.

Often the method for analysis is established after the research has taken place, as the researcher needs to use insight and creativity to analyse and present the data in a clear way. In my context I was looking at people's experiences of high school drama and what they remembered about the roles they studied and performed. I then analysed the answers by summarising the responses that were relevant or offered development of the questions I had raised, looking for trends or themes in answers. While I noted the trends, I often also noted individual responses, as each experience is valid, even if the issues or opinions were shared by just one person. I omitted answers that were not relevant or advanced points that did not relate to my research. "Research participants are not always created equal—one well-placed articulate informant will often advance the research far better than any randomly chosen sample of 50"(Given, 698). This process is a version of the data reduction and analysis strategy "thematic coding" as Lisa M. Given describes:

the analyst frequently begins with a list of themes known (or at least anticipated) to be found in the data. When data for thematic analysis are collected through semi-structured interviews, some themes will be anticipated in the data set because those concepts were explicitly included in data collection. Codes may also come from a beginning conceptual model, the review of the literature, or professional experience. (868)

As my data were collected through semi-structured interviews in the form of a survey, I have grouped my results by survey question, as each question relates to different themes within my research and offered different trends in answers. I used the academic theory I had researched to ground my analysis in feminist theory as well as using my own experience as a young woman who studied theatre in high school.

As Given explains, "In coding, portions of data are separated from their original context and labelled in some way so that all data bearing the same label can be retrieved and inspected together" (868). I used coding to identify pieces of answers that were relevant and sometimes contrasted them with different answers or different questions to gain insight. Given specifies that:

In order to develop useful generalizations from thematic coding, themes must be synthesized. The product of a thematic analysis is more than a list of themes and their descriptions. The product of a thematic analysis, like any qualitative analysis, includes both the important concepts and processes identified in the study and the overarching patterns of experience by which those concepts and processes are manifested. (868)

In my discussion section, I synthesise the results of my data to gain insight about how young people are exposed to feminism in high school. I related their experiences to my own and made connections between the themes of the plays being taught and impacts on student experience. I then used these findings, as well as my literature review, to create a list of questions to evaluate and analyse plays recommended for performance by high school students, which is explained further in the next chapter.

### Participants

As part of my research, I completed an ethics application that was judged low risk, meaning there was a low risk of adverse reactions if participants chose to take part in the study. All prospective participants were provided with an information sheet prior to taking part in the study (see APPENDIX A). Using the Massey Human ethics-approved templates for information sheets and consent forms, I conducted anonymised purposive sampling to recruit drama students/ people who have an interest in performing theatre, who were above the age of 18, and who had experiences studying drama while in high-school. I contacted them either directly or through my network of contacts within the drama field and posted the SurveyMonkey link in specific Facebook groups such as “Excessive Expressives” (Massey University Theatre Student and Alumni Group), for anyone who felt they fit these criteria and wanted to complete the anonymous survey.

Respondents were seven males, eight females, one non-binary, and one female/non-binary. Their experiences of high school drama were all in Aotearoa New Zealand between 2008 and 2022, although most respondents studied drama at high school within the last 8 years. The data are not representative, given the small sample, but they do provide some interesting qualitative insights into other students’ experiences of studying drama at a high school level and the issues that they encountered.

The qualitative nature of my research meant I put a lot of emphasis on, “case study analysis— why particular people (or groups) feel particular ways, the processes by which these attitudes are constructed, and the role they play in dynamic processes within the organization or group” (Given, 698). The goal of my research was not to try to generalise about a group, but to broaden my understanding of the range of reasons why certain people feel certain ways about their experiences of high school drama.

I encouraged all participants to put their own mental health first, and to only share as much information as they felt comfortable sharing in the interview or questionnaire. The participants could stop the interview or questionnaire at any time and refuse to answer any question (or leave any question blank if completing the survey digitally). Therefore, the risk of distress to participants was low. Nonetheless, I provided a counselling service link in the information sheet.

If a participant chose to take part in the research, they were able to either choose a Zoom interview, or complete the survey questions through a website called SurveyMonkey. All respondents chose the online option. The questionnaire consisted of eight questions and took the participants approximately 15 to 20 mins to complete.

The questions were:

- What is your gender?
- Years studying high school drama (e.g.: 2011-13) :
- What country was your high school drama experience in?
- What was your favourite role you played during high school drama and why?
- What was your least favourite role that you played during high school drama and why?
- Can you describe any experiences you had that made you feel empowered or helped build your confidence while participating in high school drama?
- If you could choose or create your dream role to perform while in high school, what would that character be like and what attributes might they have?
- In your opinion, were there any empowering feminist role models within the plays you studied as part of high school Drama, and can you describe them? (You don't have to have played the role yourself.)

- Are there any other experiences of high school Drama that you think might be helpful for this research study, that you would like to share?
- Would you like to be notified when this research becomes available?

## Results

Because the data were qualitative, results are presented here as narrative summaries of key themes in the answers that related to or illuminated my research questions. Some extraneous material (such as personal comments on particular teachers and teaching styles) that ranged outside the focus of this thesis on young people's experiences of performing characters and traits of empowering role models has not been included here.

When asked what role they performed during high school was their favourite and why, one notable response included a description of how playing a strong feminine character who "liked to rebel and stood their ground" allowed the respondent to "step into a character that was completely unlike themselves". This reflects the relationship between actor and character and how the actor is often encouraged (or expects that they should) "step into" or inhabit the minds of the characters they play. There was a common trend in many answers that described how performing characters who were unlike the actors themselves, allowed the actors to "dive into the drive of a character and how difficult but fun it can be to inhabit the mind of someone not like themselves". This highlights the personal relationship that these young actors were developing with their characters in order to understand them and "hold onto their different personas in a truthful way".

One respondent described "feeling what the character was feeling" when performing their monologue, which further emphasises how close an actor can become to the character in some processes of performance. This suggests to me that playing characters who experience heavy traumatic events may involve young actors in feeling trauma, and vice versa that playing characters who experience positive, confidence-building events or moments where they need to stand their ground, may teach the actor confidence through second-hand experience. However, respondents also noted that for a character to be fun to play, the character needed to be complex and have an element of "figuring out" so that the actor could use their "emotional range" and "ground the character's actions in rationale while still allowing the audience to empathise with where they were coming from". This points to the need for complex, three-dimensional characters

so that the actor can exercise their interpretational skills and creativity when developing the character.

Themes in the responses about least favourite role included being asked to represent something that felt age-inappropriate, e.g., a “Stripper in Miss Saigon when I was 15”, or negative, e.g., performing “toxic traits” and “bullying” which were not resolved by the drama. One respondent said, “at the end of the play the character’s actions were still cruel and there wasn’t much to redeem them. The play depicted all these necessary and important elements of girls living in the twenty first century, but it was a total tragedy with no offering of a happy ending”.

Another respondent described similar experiences of performing plays with heavy themes, saying that their class “definitely had a majority of girls [...] and together we had a real impact on our teacher who was male.” “He certainly chose very confronting and bold texts which got him into a bit of trouble with other teachers, but I admired that about him— he was pretty resolute on the idea that theatre is the place to challenge audience members. Make them laugh and then kick them in the ribs ‘oh that’s so messed up, why was I just laughing at that’), entertain them and then send them home with questions, get them to start conversations and reflect on the world.”

This respondent’s class “often had long discussions about things they weren’t happy with in the play like representation, uncomfortable subject matter and some feeling anxious to show their family or friends for fear of it coming across the wrong way.” The respondent noted that having those conversations was a confidence-building experience that made them feel “empowered to share their voice and concerns” noting how this could potentially help them with their “future career in theatre or on film sets, often where it’ll be a male-dominated space.” However, they also said, “I do wonder if a group of Year 12s is the right place to make these [theatrical ideas that challenge the audience] come to fruition though. He saw in our class that we had (genuinely) a pretty outstanding level of talent and maturity and could pull these feats off, certainly shocking the audience with the themes that we dealt with and things that come out of our sixteen-year-old mouths. But there were some people who joined our class later or weren’t as passionate about theatre who I think were taken aback by the level of ambition and wished for a more easy-going space, just wanted to enjoy acting or the experience of putting on a play without the same level of confrontation.” Many of these responses align with my own beliefs that theatre should be a space for everyone and that in a school setting, where students are being graded and don’t always have

as much say in the plays they perform, there need to be considerations made so that students have opportunities to perform roles they are comfortable with.

Other themes about least favourite characters included discussion of performing plays or characters who were difficult for a high school actor to relate to because of their difference in age or gender, such as “a juror in *Twelve Angry Men*” or, “a husband from the 1930s” and having to perform across gender and ethnic identity difference. Comments about gender included (from female actors asked to portray male characters) “it was also difficult to translate the character accurately into a woman, with a lack of female perspective throughout the whole play” and “I found it hard to play him well because I couldn’t connect with the character at all”; and, from a nonbinary actor asked to play a female role “playing a girl really didn’t feel right in my body as I struggled to present myself as a girl at high school. (I am AFAB assigned female at birth but use NB Non-binary pronouns)”. A white actor reported being cast as a Pasifika character, “which felt really inappropriate of me to play that character as a white person. Then I got marked down for not doing a good accent all because I felt uncomfortable doing it.” Again, these testimonies point to the need for plays with a diverse range of characters, that provide options for students to play roles they connect with and are comfortable portraying. Another respondent reported an experience that exemplifies this, saying that they enjoyed when they “got to compose music on an electric guitar and design the lighting in the play *CRAVE* by Sarah Cane. The play itself was super tricky, with themes of mental health, rape, and suicide. So, let’s just say I was grateful I wasn’t one of the characters so I could remove myself from the context of the play.” This is one example of a drama class providing a range of different opportunities for students to engage with the material, not only through acting, so that students who feel uncomfortable performing heavy themes can still find value in theatrical performance, but also reinforces that students may not always express their discomfort clearly in the context of power-relations in the school setting.

As noted above in the section relating to favourite roles, many of the respondents answered with characters that they related to or felt a connection with; many of the answers for least favourite role described roles that were different from the actors in a way that they couldn’t relate to or felt untrue representing. One respondent sums it up when they describe their dream character, saying, “I would create a character that on the outside presents themselves as someone very different to myself [...] On the inside, I would want to have similar progressive values / morals to the character. This would allow me to really connect with them, understand them and feel engaged with them. Being different on the outside, though, makes it fun to play the character.” The way I

have interpreted this is that the character needs to have an aspect of theatricality or difference on the outside that allows the actor to feel like they are representing a different person on stage, but the character must also have shared values with the actor, enough for the actor to understand them from reading the script, and to feel like they can play their actions and emotions truthfully.

Another respondent shared, “I recall a big focus of my high school Drama to have been exploring different cultures and interactions between people of different cultures which was really engaging and eye-opening at times. Drama really helps you to understand people, once you’re able to submerge yourself in their story, their background, their values, their skills, their interests, etc. Also— representation really matters!!!! It is so important to include people of different cultures, religions, sexualities, gender identities, BBIPOC, etc.” A school classroom is diverse, it encompasses many ethnicities and spectrums of gender and so a playscript that is performed in a classroom has a need for a diverse, well-developed cast in order for the students in that classroom to feel represented and able to perform in roles that they connect with.

When asked about empowering or confidence building experiences during high school, notable answers included a respondent who said, “I had good teachers who pushed me and [other] student[s] that were incredibly supportive. I got the part of Argan even though I auditioned for a much smaller role because I didn’t believe I was good enough for it.” Another respondent described their drama teacher as “always very open to giving people a go at playing different roles to what they would usually play” which allowed students to “step out of their comfort zone and go for roles that challenged [them] and allowed [them] to put in 110% effort”.

Other trends in respondents’ answers included being given a sense of responsibility or creative control, with one saying, “Directing a whole play by myself for the first time [...] was a new challenge and felt amazing to be given both responsibility and freedom in the direction.” Another respondent explained how working on their own, on a theatrical topic of their choosing, “really let me see what I could be capable of when I was given the permission and means to explore the kind of theatre that I wanted to.” Another respondent described working on an independent project outside of the classroom, saying “I really enjoyed having creative freedom and a chance to perform things I enjoyed working on and directing without having to conform to NCEA standards.”

This leads on to another trend in answers for this question, in which several respondents answered that they did not have empowering or confidence building experiences in high school. For

example, one respondent said, “I didn’t really feel confident at all until I left high school” while another simply answered, “not in high school.” Though we cannot understand these respondents’ full experiences or circumstance that led to them answering this question negatively, it does suggest that the current range of plays offered for performance in high school could benefit from a review with confidence building experiences in mind.

Notable answers about creating their dream character/ role they would like to play in a high school production, and attributes that character might have, included, “a character of similar age, who is coming to terms with their identity” stating that “it would be something extremely relevant to me and many others at the time of high school”. Other responses made reference to characters who were strong or had power in the script, one said, “I would make myself a lead role and they’d be hella headstrong or some type of quirky” while another wanted to be “the funny character, making quick-witted jokes” and another wanted to play, “a role about a feminist calling out the patriarchy.” Some wanted roles that offered different perspectives and better representation, such as one respondent who wanted to play “Someone queer.” They said “I would’ve really appreciated the chance to play someone not straight, and to play someone asexual. And in playing a non hetero character, to have them be fun and interesting to play, rather than only worried about coming out to people. A strong, regular, queer woman.”

When asked to describe any empowering feminist role models within the plays they studied, several respondents answered with reference to Shakespeare such as, “Lady Macbeth from Macbeth and Medea from the play of her namesake. They were both depicted as women driven by their will and not that of men, striving to get what they want no matter the obstacles.” Another said, they “saw [a performance of] Emilia, an inspiring true story about Shakespeare’s lover and how she fought against the patriarchy to write and be published” though they “can’t recall any plays I actually performed in that empowered women.” Another recalled watching “another class put on *Ophelia Thinks Harder* [by Jean Betts] which is a kiwi feminist rewrite of Hamlet.” They loved it, and said, “It was great to see Ophelia’s musings and distaste for being born a girl, while Hamlet is a complete asshole.” This was one of two references to plays written by women, the other described a character called “Sam in the play *Elevator*” written by Jess Sayer, saying “She was outspoken, honest, vulnerable and loud.”

A notable number of respondents answered that they couldn’t recall any empowering feminist role-models, or that they, “mostly only studied plays with male protagonists.” Another said,

“Honestly, not that I can think of from Drama. I went to an all-girls school so empowering feminist role models were definitely embedded in a lot of things we studied, but I don’t recall that ever being a key focus in Drama.” Another highlighted how they wish there were empowering feminist roles, but their “school in reality didn’t care for representation in the arts. A lot of the students just wanted to screw around, and the teachers weren’t given the resources to be able to explore the avenues of theatre outside of what they already had in their offices.” This suggests that the lack of empowering feminist roles described in these experiences could be due to lack of support and resources for teachers to educate students about these topics and also a lack of female-and-nonbinary-written plays being taught in the classroom. Another respondent backs this up as, when asked to comment on any other experiences of high school drama that could be helpful, they shared that “My experience was very lacklustre on all fronts, so I don’t have any particularly good or particularly bad things to kōrero about. It was just bland, using almost all plays written by old men.”

## Discussion

The responses gathered for this research provided a range of experiences, many of which were similar to my own experiences of high school drama but others of which highlighted issues I had not yet considered. The respondent who mentioned having classroom discussions about performing plays that raised themes that some students found uncomfortable reminded me of an experience I had at university. While I was older than the participant would have been, I was still performing a play in an educational setting that dealt with uncomfortable themes, playing ‘Goody’ in *Vinegar Tom* by Caryl Churchill, a play about the witch trials in the 1500s. I was probably hard to cast in this play as I wanted to maintain personal boundaries (I didn’t want to kiss on stage or expose myself, as the thought of it made me uncomfortable). However, all of the female roles had to do uncomfortable things that involved situations ranging from simulating sex, being subjected to tests and trials such as having their crotch shaved in search of a ‘devil’s mark’ or being pricked and poked, and many of the female characters were hanged at the end too, which came with its own emotional load, given the serious tone of the play. My character was a follower of the ‘witch hunter’ and blind to the horrific torture she was inflicting on the women who were suspected witches, by the devotion she had to the idea she was ‘doing the right thing’ and her willingness to do whatever the ‘witch hunter’ said. She did not receive her come-uppance by the end of the play, instead, the suspected witches who were humanised throughout the play were hanged. I understand the playwright’s intention of showing how mass hysteria caused the torture

and death of many suspected witches during the trials, and how this could be considered feminist as it highlights the inequities those women faced within their society; however, none of the women's roles within the play had a redemptive arc.

While I do think theatre is an important vehicle to explore the dark areas of human nature, it is also important to keep in mind the impact of exploring heavy themes on the cast and actors involved, especially if they are young people. Bettelheim suggests that the purpose of psychoanalysis, as he describes in the context of fairy tales, is to enable us:

to accept the problematic nature of life without being defeated by it or giving in to escapism. Freud's prescription is that only by struggling courageously against what seem like overwhelming odds can man[sic] succeed in wringing meaning out of his[sic] existence. (8)

But in our current social climate, and in a school or education setting where the choice of plays performed is largely decided by authority figures, the impact of the issues raised in material for students must be considered and students should arguably have the option of performing a 'lighter' or more relatable role if they are not comfortable with the actions of a character they are given.

The respondent who described having class discussions about the themes raised in the plays they performed also shows how my own experience of performing plays with mature themes requiring discussion is not an isolated one. While it can be a positive experience as described above, it also puts the teacher in a position where they may be raising topics that could be triggering for students, that they may not be as well equipped to educate students about, such as mental health issues for example, which may be better explained by a psychologist. "Acting teachers are neither trained, nor necessarily equipped to recognise, hyper-arousal and dissociative responses in students, or to help process traumatic experiences so that these do not leave a harmful residue" (McFarren qtd by Maxwell, Seton and Szabó, 71).

In the plays I have written, instead of exploring the aftermath of mental-health issues left unchecked or other heavy themes, I have chosen to explore topics that are more relevant to the high-school audience performing them. One example would be Dolly's perfectionism in *Wool and Wood*, something many academic students experience and if internalised for long enough, can have lasting detrimental impacts on a person's life. In the play, it is not about Dolly casting

out that trait, which is a part of her, it is about her learning to manage it in a healthy way. Similarly, with April's anxiety and indecisiveness in *Gumballs, Music and Whatever's in the Box...*, when she opens her box and finds a compass, it is about her gaining the confidence to pursue the conclusions she comes to; low confidence caused by anxiety or indecisiveness is another trait that if left unmanaged, can limit a person's opportunities. I argue that it would be more beneficial for students if teachers were able to share their insights on topics like behavioural development as it is something that is usually covered in their studies to become a teacher, and it allows them to cover topics that students will find beneficial without putting them in a position where they are expected to educate students on topics they are not equipped to teach and students aren't emotionally ready to learn.

I have integrated the ideas mentioned above, about having a character be different on the outside but still having shared values with the actor, into the plays I have written by creating a diverse cast where each character has to come to terms with and learn to manage different items. The items are large and quirky, and their meaning is often symbolic or opaque rather than literal, so as to allow some room for actor and audience interpretation. I have also left parts of the script open for interpretation, for example not specifying the items that some of the supporting characters carry in *Family Ties* so that the actors can feel that they have input in creating the character, while still having to carry a significant item that lets the actor feel like they are portraying a character different to themselves.

Many of the respondents to my questionnaire mentioned they had enjoyed having the opportunity to direct or take charge within their production in some way, which inspired me with my own plays to leave aspects open to interpretation – most notably the items belonging to some of the supporting characters in “Family Ties” and what the items represent for each character. This was to allow the actors to feel as though they were part of the character creation process, and in creating their characters' relationships with their items, they are also given an opportunity to be able to understand the characters in a new way.

The respondent who wanted more LGBTQ+ representation and described a desire to play “a strong regular queer woman” touches on an idea that I think is best summed up in a quote from the documentary about the making of Schitt's Creek, *Best Wishes, Warmest Regards: A Schitt's Creek Farewell*, a TV show that is praised as a positive example of LGBTQ+ characters being written in an empowering way. Philip Picardi, former editor in Chief of *Out* magazine describes

“one scene where Patrick sings to [David] and it’s such a beautiful moment because when you see gay relationships on screen [...] they’re often portrayed through a lens of tragedy or strife or struggle, right? It’s like, look at all we had to overcome to love each other, you know?” (Segal, 27.59-28.11). Emily Hampshire, the actress who plays ‘Stevie’ on the show sums up further by saying, “It just never would have occurred to me that it’s better to do a show where there *is* no homophobia than to do a show that speaks to it and talks about how it does [all kinds of things]” (Segal, 27.11-27.22). These were quotes that inspired me early on in my process to approach writing a feminist play in the same way.

The critic Eleanor Fuchs describes the idea of plays being a world that passes before you on stage (6), and so I pondered the questions, if we as playwrights can control what happens in the world of our plays, why are we not using that to create worlds where we can show how things could work instead of pointing out how they currently do not. Can we write LGBTQ+ characters who are strong and confident and don’t face homophobia? Can we write female characters who are taken seriously? Can we create a world on stage where gender is not an issue for everyone? While writing my scripts, I have tried to keep these provocations in mind, and while I have found that the main ingredient for sustaining interest in plays is conflict, another main ingredient is growth and if I could maintain a balance of the two and give each character some aspect of hope or growth by the end, the play still felt satisfying.

The responses gathered for this research provided a range of experiences, many of which were similar to my own experiences of high school drama. From both the interviews and scholarly literature, I then developed the following list of features to include and features to avoid when thinking about writing a feminist play for young people. I was particularly inspired by the Bechdel Test, and The Kent Test as tools for analysis, but as neither of these tests were developed for theatre, they cannot be directly applied to analysing plays. As stated above, I felt there needed to be more of a framework dedicated specifically to the analysis of feminist representation in plays for young people. As a result, I have created my own framework of questions that include questions inspired by both the Bechdel and Kent tests, and also questions that are inspired by my own research, aimed at analysing the plays through a feminist lens to evaluate their potential impact on and potential to empower young actors.

## Revised Question Framework for Writing Feminist Plays for Young People

### Questions Inspired by Bechdel:

- Does the play include two or more female characters?
- Are those female characters named?
- Do the female characters talk to each other, and is the subject of their conversation something other than a man?

### Questions Inspired by Kent:

- Does the play include well-rounded and thoughtful representations of race and gender, or does it perpetuate harmful stereotypes/ tropes? Eg: racial or gender stereotypes like the 'sassy black woman' or 'dumb blonde'?
- Does the female character have their own plot/ narrative arc? Or are they included in the story solely to aid a male character or anchor his story?
- Does the play include reciprocal meaningful interaction between characters of different ethnicities? (Female characters of colour should not be included in the narrative only to prop up a white character. Each character should be well rounded in themselves and show positive examples of how we can interact with each other without racial or gender bias).
- Does the play avoid overly-sexualising or fetishising the characters?
- Does the play avoid including female characters solely for the purpose of creating competition for a male character?
- Does the play include female characters with their own agency, who do not engage in self-sacrificing behaviour? (Unless their sacrifice is very clearly established as in line with their views, wants, needs and virtues and it is believable that they would choose this for themselves.)

### Questions Inspired by my own research:

- Are the characters modelling empowerment? (Are the characters put into confidence-building situations where they can stand up for themselves, so that the actors can build their own confidence by learning from the characters' actions?)

- Does the plot include age-appropriate struggles for the characters that are also relatable to the age group? (Are the characters struggling with issues that actors in the age group playing them would also be struggling with?)
- Do the characters overcome their struggles? (As opposed to being beaten down by them?)
- Is the script open enough for interpretation to allow for diverse representation on stage, including non-binary characters?
- Does the play feature an ensemble cast and are all of the characters developed with their own arc/ goals that contribute to the story?
- Does the narrative follow a bildungsroman/ coming of age structure? (Do the characters learn something, change, or have a sense of hope by the end?)
- Are the characters positive role models for dealing with emotions? (Do they react to emotions in ways that are healthy/ do not hurt others/ allow the characters to express their emotions through healthy outlets?)
- Do the roles create opportunities for the actors playing them to have input in the creation of the characters and the way they are portrayed? (Is there space in the script for the actor to have creativity in the way they interpret and portray the characters?)

## Conclusions

This chapter has analysed original data detailing experiences of high school drama collected through an anonymous survey. I used these experiences to compare and contrast with my own, generating insights into a broader spectrum of student experiences in high school drama. The research, which provided anonymous responses from seventeen people currently over the age of 18, revealed that instances of dealing with dark or traumatic themes in high school drama classrooms in Aotearoa New Zealand were not uncommon. Several respondents answered that they could not recall studying any plays with empowering feminist role-models, while others suggested that their experience of drama was “very lacklustre on all fronts” and that they mostly studied “plays written by old men”. Many responses described feeling uncomfortable with the themes raised within the plays they performed in class and showed that my own experiences of performing plays dealing with dark themes such as violence, death, or family abuse, were not isolated. I concluded by identifying and summarising characterisation and plot traits that can

contribute to strong feminist role models for young people in theatre and created my own list of questions to guide feminist playwriting for contemporary young people. In the next chapter, I use this framework to analyse plays recommended for young people to perform, with a feminist lens, to evaluate their potential to offer empowering roles and experiences for young adult actors.

## Chapter Three: Close Reading of Primary Texts

In this chapter, I first summarise the ‘big picture’ of plays currently recommended for high school students in Aotearoa New Zealand to perform, exploring questions such as the number of lead roles by gender, topic, playwright’s gender, etc. I sought this information to help inform my idea of what feminist plays that would fill this gap would look like, and to identify and summarise character traits that did/ did not have a positive contribution to the representation of female role models. I then sum up some of the overall insight into the current snapshot of plays recommended for high school students to perform and the social and gender landscape they are representing to young people in Aotearoa New Zealand. Then, I use the list generated at the end of the previous chapter to close-read and analyse two plays that are recommended by NCEA for performance, *Children of the Poor* (Thompson) and *Wednesday to Come* (Renée), in more depth.

### Analysing NCEA Plays Suggested for Performance by Young people

In Aotearoa New Zealand, subjects within the performing arts are offered at all year levels: “The New Zealand School Curriculum [...] currently includes four arts disciplines: (dance, drama, music and visual arts) while creative writing is part of the English learning area. Years 1–8 include all four disciplines; years 9–10 include at least two; and students in years 11–13 can choose to specialise in one or more arts subjects” (Pollock qtd by Palmer, 67).

As part of my research, I wanted to explore the plays students are performing in high school classrooms, and so I scrutinised the resources for drama teachers on the Ministry of Education’s NCEA website (TKI: Te Kete Ipurangi) and collated a list of recommended plays for each performance standard. The performance standards I included were titled: “And So He Plays His Part...” (Lvl1), “Explore New Zealand Drama” (Lvl1), “The Way We Were – Bruce Mason’s *The Pōhutukawa Tree*” (Lvl1), “Classic Comedy” (Lvl2), “Full Circle” (Lvl2), “Sweet Revenge” (Lvl2), “Those Crazy Creative People” (Lvl 2), “Modern Magic” (Lvl 3), “Get Real” (Lvl 3), “How Absurd!” (Lvl3), “Shared Direction” (Lvl3), and “Slice of Life” (Lvl 3). This resulted in a list of sixty-eight plays, though some parts of these standards may have been updated since I conducted this portion of my research in June 2021. This would be a beneficial review, as at the time of my researching this, the NCEA play lists that were available to high school teachers had not been updated since 2015.

I recorded basic information for each play, such as the name of the play and playwright, the playwright's gender, and their location, the genre of the play and year it was published, as well as the NCEA standard and year level it was recommended for. I then checked play descriptions and cast lists in the printed scripts and/or online, so that I could also compare factors such as the number of female, male or non-gendered roles offered in each play, the gender of the protagonist and the key themes. While I acknowledge that this only gives a shallow overview of the large number of suggested plays, this type of research would be similar to the way a teacher may approach choosing a play for their classroom to study.

I was surprised to see how old a lot of the plays were; especially considering how, as Case describes, in many early plays such as Shakespeare, female characters were written by male playwrights and played by boys on stage. "Real women were invisible in the offices of the Church, the majority of schools and standard theatrical performances" (Case, 27). Even when theatres began to allow women to play female characters in performance, the characters still perpetuated a fictional idea of woman, not reflective of real women's experiences. "The fiction of the female gender had been securely inscribed on real women. This marked a transition from the virgin goddess Athena (and the virgin queen Elizabeth) to the sex goddess of the twentieth century. Either way, women did not escape the role of merchandise in the world of male exchange" (Case, 27).

The earliest play on the list was Aristophanes' *The Wasps*, written in 422BC, while the most recent was *Niu Sila* by Oscar Kightley and Dave Armstrong, written in 2007. Three plays were written in the 1600s, three in the 1700s, one in the 1800s, six in the first half of the 1900s and forty-seven in the second half, and seven in the early 2000s. The average year of publication was 1919, which is more than a hundred years ago. I understand the need for a range of plays that show how the art of theatre has developed throughout different time periods; however, I believe there should be more plays on that list that reflect the current climate of theatre as there have been many social and cultural developments in the last sixteen years, and many valuable plays written that are not included on this list.

I was interested to see how many of the plays were written by males compared to females, and my suspicion that female playwrights would be under-represented within this list was supported when I did the totals. Of the sixty-eight plays I researched, only thirteen were written by a female playwright, while fifty-four were written by a man or a group of men, and one play was written

by a male/female duo- though the play in question, *Verbatim* was listed on the resource as written by Miranda Harcourt, I found through further research that it was actually jointly written by herself and William Brandt. This statistic suggests that if teachers follow these suggested plays (which they often do because these plays usually have the most teaching resources available or are suggested because they are suited to the standard) female students may be missing out on the opportunity to play roles that are written by women.

There was evident representation of Aotearoa New Zealand playwrights, with half of the sixty-eight plays featuring Aotearoa New Zealand writers. Of these thirty-four Aotearoa New Zealand writers though, there were only nine females and one male/ female duo, further proving how female playwrights are under-represented within the plays suggested for NCEA drama.

The list of recommended plays featured almost twice as many lead male protagonist roles as female protagonist roles, with thirty-seven plays featuring male protagonists, twenty plays featuring female protagonists, nine plays with an ensemble cast or no clear protagonist and two plays with a male/ female duo as the lead. I was glad to see some ensemble casts as I believe a valuable part of theatre is collaboration and being able to work together to create a final product, which can be beneficial for all genders, but there is clearly a need for more plays with female protagonists. It is also important to note that, like the Bechdel Test, this research only gives a shallow view of female representation within this list of plays as it is beyond the scope of this research to explore each text in depth to see the situations each female protagonist is put into and their appropriateness for young adults. I am merely quantifying the number of female protagonists within a selection of plays and that is a blunt appraisal. Plays such as *The Love of The Nightingale* (Wertenbaker) feature on this list and are even described as feminist, though they still include uncomfortable situations for their female characters. I would further specify that there is not only a need for more female protagonists, but also a need for those lead characters to experience situations that students can learn from that can help build their confidence.

In terms of the gender spread of roles offered, there were several large casts that were flexible in number. In this case, I always included the largest possible cast size that the script offered. I found again that there were almost twice as many roles for male characters as there were for female characters. The selection of plays offered 558 male roles, 318 female roles, and 42 non-gendered or unspecified roles. This shows how feminine and non-binary students have a much

narrower selection when it comes to choosing roles and are therefore more likely to miss out on the opportunity to play a diverse range of characters.

While researching the key themes for each play, I noticed that I was often noting negative themes in my key themes column. I decided that after I had collected a few key themes or ideas for each play, I would search my list to see how many times certain words and themes occurred. This list is not exhaustive as I only did light research to find these themes; I did not read every single play, though I did read reviews and library summaries where available. I found that the word 'death' came up in my key themes column ten times, 'war' occurred eight times, 'violence' occurred seven times, 'suicide' came up five times, 'murder' came up four times, 'racism' came up three times and 'abuse' occurred twice. I wanted to contrast this with some positive keywords, and so I did another search and found that 'coming of age' or 'growing up' occurred five times. This suggests that there are some plays with a bildungsroman structure, but this is still less than one tenth of the total. I also found that 'feminist' or 'feminism' came up six times, which shows there are some feminist themes within the plays; however, there is definitely room for more feminist representation.

Interestingly, of the six plays with feminist themes five of them were written by Aotearoa New Zealanders. Another interesting search was for the word 'family' which occurred eighteen times, possibly the most common theme within the selection; though it is important to note that this word was often accompanied by other words such as 'family loss', 'family issues', 'family traditions', or 'family honour.' From these searches, I could see that a lot of the themes raised in these plays appeared to be negative and intense, which was concerning, especially considering some students studying these plays may be entirely new to studying or performing drama. Maxwell, Seton and Szabó cite doctoral research by McFarren which demonstrated that "The potential for personal distress is linked to actual methods of actor training" (McFarren qtd by Maxwell, Seton & Szabó, 71), suggesting that certain methods of acting can trigger trauma-responses in students. Given that statistical research into youth mental health over the past decade shows "a marked increase in psychological distress for this age group, perhaps reflecting the rapidly increasing magnitude of the challenges faced by young people currently" (Menzies, Gluckman, & Poulton, 2), I argue that theatre can play a role to offer tools to help young people cope with the unprecedented times they are growing up in, instead of exacerbating their issues with overly negative subject-matter or pessimistic views.

## Close Reading

I analysed two of the plays suggested for performance in high school in more depth; *Children of the Poor* (Thompson) and *Wednesday to Come* (Renée). I wanted to look at these plays in detail through a feminist young adult lens, taking special note of the opportunities created for feminine characters, their interactions, and how empowering it was for the play to be performed by young adults. I chose these two plays as they explore similar themes and depict a similar time period within Aotearoa New Zealand history. I also thought they would provide a good contrast to each other, to allow for comparison between a work by a female playwright from Aotearoa New Zealand and a work by a male playwright from Aotearoa New Zealand. I will include a brief context for each playwright, as well as information about the NCEA standard/s the plays are suggested for before beginning my analysis of each play. I used the Bechdel and Kent tests as springboards for my analysis of these plays, but as these tools are not designed for my specific context and only provide a general picture of female representation, I adapted and expanded them for my own analysis, and followed the revised question framework, as listed above.

Mervyn Thompson was known as a colourful and sometimes controversial character in Aotearoa New Zealand history. He was born in Kaitangata (South Otago) and raised in mining towns on the West Coast. He began working in the mines with his father at age eighteen, and eventually came to theatre through the Reefton drama club, as described in his solo autobiographical play, *Passing Through* (1991). He had a long career as a director, performer, teacher, and playwright. He was one of the first lecturers to teach drama as a subject at University of Auckland and co-founded the Court Theatre in Christchurch. He always championed plays from Aotearoa New Zealand and was one to promote the works of Renée and Greg McGee, who were some of the most renowned playwrights in Aotearoa New Zealand in the 1980s. His own creative work often depicts aspects of Aotearoa New Zealand's political and social history, and frequently uses a non-naturalistic dramatic style that includes songs and music, expressionistic choruses, and Brechtian-style theatricality. He published fourteen plays in his career; *Children of the Poor* was published around the middle of his playwriting career in 1990. A reviewer described *Children of the Poor* by saying "it is a portrait not just of poverty but of how the savagery and hypocrisy of New Zealand social conformity crushes the poor and disadvantaged in particular into criminal deviancy if they are to retain a spark of individuality" (Farnsworth qtd by O'Donnell, foreword, *Children of the Poor*, 10). Thompson had a big impact on the Aotearoa New Zealand theatre

scene before he passed away from throat cancer in 1992 (O'Donnell, foreword, *Children of The Poor*, 9).

Renée, known in the public sphere by just her first name, is a lesbian feminist writer of Ngāti Kahungunu and Irish-English-Scots ancestry. She was born Renée Gertrude Taylor in 1929 and was the oldest child of a working-class family in Napier, Aotearoa New Zealand. She started working at the age of 12 and tried out a lot of different jobs in the theatre industry before obtaining a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Auckland. She has since written more than twenty plays, published nine novels, and earned many literary accolades. When asked about herself in an interview, she said, "I'm not a self-declared radical. I'm a self-declared lesbian feminist, yes. For some people, lesbian means radical, but I don't think that I'd describe myself as a radical. I'd describe myself as a reasonable person" (Six Angry Women, 25.44). Her writing is "often focussed on the previously unsung lives of women, Māori, the LGBT community and the working class" (Anon, Foreword, *Wednesday to Come Trilogy*, 2019).

In mentioning the two Aotearoa New Zealand playwrights Renée and Mervyn Thompson, I feel I must also mention the Mervyn Thompson incident of 1984. While I understand that this is an event that both playwrights would probably prefer wasn't revisited, I feel it is important to include as context, as many drama processes include research about the playwright and during my research on both these plays, I couldn't help but find out about the violent historical event where Mervyn Thompson was abducted by six women in 1984. The incident was explored in a 2021 documentary entitled "Six Angry Women" directed by Megan Jones, who explains how Thompson, while working as a drama lecturer at Auckland University in 1984, was abducted soon after directing Renée's play titled *Setting the Table*. He was chained to a tree, physically assaulted, and the kidnappers also painted the word 'Rapist' on his car. He was abducted in Westmere, a suburb of Auckland, and the events that night seemed to mimic the events within Renée's play that he had just directed. Some of his former students noted the similarities between the event and the play, saying,

There's a scene in [the play] where one of them goes out at night and she's abducted a man at knife point... [change of speaker] ties him to a fence, sticks the sign 'rapist' around his head, pulls his pants down and I think stabs him... [change of speaker] Three months after we did the play, Mervyn was

kidnapped in uncannily similar circumstances, right down to where it happened. (Jones, 29.32min).

Many people turned towards Renée with suspicion after the connections were made between her play and the event. In an interview, she describes how she was approached by a policeman, who, “Asked me if I knew anything, and I said no. Well, I wrote a play... that’s all I did. I didn’t have anything to do with attacking Mervyn Thompson. End of story.” (Renée as qtd by Six Angry Women, 31.21min). In her own words, while reflecting on her time working at the Wellington branch of the *Broadsheet Collective*—a long-running feminist magazine—Renée explained how as a group of women:

We had a lot of fun. We laughed a lot as well as talked about grave and serious matters, like rape. There *were* people who argued that we need to do something directly; we need to attack the attacker. We need to use violence as a weapon. We need to show men that they can’t do this and get away with it, because they very often do. But I was arguing against it. I don’t approve of violence whoever does it. It’s not the answer. There was no theatre in this country that dealt with stuff like this. And so, I wrote *Setting the Table*. It’s about a group of women and vigilante justice. Mervyn was the director. He was very good with the script. He seemed to understand it. (Renée, qtd by Jones, 27.30min-28.20min)

Suspicion was lifted on Renée when, the day after the event, the women who abducted Mervyn Thompson issued an anonymous statement,

They say they’re a neighbourhood watch group of women including housewives, professionals, Polynesians, and Europeans. The man they’ve targeted is a white-collar rapist in a position of authority over his victims. They issue a call to action – women should take the law into their own hands if the justice system is letting them down. Then they vanish. (Jones, 16min 55sec)

This was followed by a campaign at the University where hundreds of printed posters that said ‘Mervyn Thompson is a Rapist’ were printed and distributed by an anonymous women’s rights group. Soon after, Thompson revealed his identity to the public as the man who was abducted, by issuing a statement, that likened his experience of being

abducted and accused, to that of being raped, to which there was, understandably, further public uproar.

In a televised interview with Genevieve Westcott, she asks him, “Mr Thompson, you do admit that you have a reputation as a playwright as being somewhat of a womanizer; some would suggest even a philanderer? How do you feel about that?” To which Thompson replied, “I went through a period at one stage in my life in which I, I... yes, I think I used women as sexual objects; I think that’s true, I think that’s true of a lot of men” (Jones, 1hr05.30min). He continued in the interview to admit that he did sleep with a former student; however, he denied being a rapist.

The student in question did not speak publicly until agreeing to an interview for the *Six Angry Women* documentary in 2021 and chose to share only her first name, Jenny. When asked why she decided to talk about it after 36 years, she replied, “It *has* been a long time, but there are probably people out there who still think Mervyn Thompson was a completely innocent man (Jones, 1hr07.47min). The harrowing story she shares suggests that this isn’t the case, and that the women who accused Mervyn Thompson of being a rapist had a foundation for their claims.

In the back of my copy of *Children of the Poor*, there is a section titled Study Notes, written by Susan Battye, which gives further information about the playwright and the play itself. Within this section, there is a part that outlines the NZQA approved achievement standards that the play is recommended for, and also goes on to describe how several Aotearoa New Zealand schools have staged productions of it. Near the end, she praises a specific moment in the play for the theatrical potential it offers,

It would be true to say that teachers are always looking for plays that 'speak' to students. At one point in the play Thompson's stage direction reads ‘ALBANY bends over a low table ... CHAPLAIN whips ALBANY. As he does so the CHORUS thwacks the floor fiercely and cries out’. In the ESA Study Guide for Level 3 Drama, drama teacher Jane Luton describes the way in which the Year 13 class depicted this moment in Auckland’s Macleans College production: They used a shadow screen, which allowed the violence to take place in such a way that it was ‘writ large’ for the audience to see but at the same time referenced the plight of all abused children. The class chose

to use its production to raise funds for World Vision, an organisation dedicated to preventing child poverty and abuse at an international level. (Battye, 120)

While I do not deny that this scene has theatrical potential, and I do not doubt that it would have been powerful, I would argue that the scene above also includes violence and humiliation, which could create uncomfortable situations and may not result in a positive, empowering experience for the actor. I would question whether this scene, and other scenes within this play, are empowering for a young cast to perform, especially in a school setting where usually the plays are chosen in advance for the assessment, and students will often only see an audition excerpt, and so aren't aware of the specific situations each character goes through in the whole play when they audition for roles. I also question whether researching Mervyn Thompson and performing his plays in secondary school is appropriate, given he has admitted his own misogynistic views (as above in the Genevieve Westcott interview), and these are in my analysis also visible in *Children of the Poor*, in the ways that the male characters interact with female characters.

*Children of the Poor* by Mervyn Thompson stood out to me in my study for many reasons but most significantly, because it illustrates a negative and unhelpful view of the subject it portrays, particularly its attitude towards women. This play is suggested for the Level 1 drama performance standard "Explore New Zealand Drama" and for the Level 3 drama performance standard "Slice of Life" meaning that students aged approximately 15 to 18 are likely to perform it. The play itself is an adaptation of John A. Lee's 1934 novel of the same name, which depicts the main character Albany Porcello's experience growing up in poverty-ridden Aotearoa New Zealand in the early 1900s. Over the course of the play Albany faces desperate poverty, crime, misery, sexual assault, and the contempt of the Presbyterian Church. The play is set in a time in Aotearoa New Zealand history where being poor, even if you were working, meant living a very hard life. It follows the protagonist, Albany, through the stages of growing up, from boyhood to working life, pointing out the bleakness and strife he must face along the way. Personally, I found this play bleak and depressing, though when I watched a production in 2019, I did note the theatrical potential it had for performance, due to the style of writing. But for me, this was overshadowed by the dark and uncomfortable content and themes it raised, and the idea that these violent and uncomfortable scenes would be performed by students in a high school setting made me wonder about the impact this may have on the students who performed the roles. To provide a more

rigorous evaluation than my initial personal reactions, I used the specific criteria derived from Bechdel, Kent, and my original research, as listed in Chapter Two, to systematically analyse the script's content and interpret how that content might be received in a high school drama class.

### **Does *Children of the Poor* pass the Bechdel Test?**

*Children of the Poor* (Thompson) does not pass the Bechdel Test as although there are many female characters, only two of the characters have a first name in the character list: Albany's sister Rose and the vaudeville performer Molly Malone. Other female characters are listed with simple descriptions instead of names, such as "Mother", "Midwife", "Baker's wife" or "Two Dunedin Ladies." Even Albany's Grandmother is listed as "Big Mother" despite being called Alice MacDonald by her husband in the script, while his name is "Sandy" in the character list. In comparison, all of the main male characters in the Porcello family have a first name, while Rose is the only main female character to be named.

There are very minimal interactions between the women who are named; nothing that could be considered a direct conversation, though the stage directions in the vaudeville performance suggest Molly Malone delivers "some of the more suggestive lines of the song [An implicitly sexualised version of the nursery rhyme Little Miss Muffet] directly at Rose." Molly Malone's directed commentary underlines Rose's earlier act of selling sexual favours to the character named "Chinese Man" in order to afford the tickets to the vaudeville show, as emphasised by the "Chinese Man" character reappearing as the spider in the performance. Even if this exchange was considered a conversation between the two women, the subject is still shaming Rose for her relations with a man. One line from the chorus emphasises this by saying, "like the men you're angels when you're not found out!" (66). The theme of Rose prostituting herself for money, beginning at age 11, recurs throughout the play and is underlined by Albany's naive view of it, "The only thing Albany knew about sex was that a girl could temper poverty by selling herself" (65). Rose does not speak directly to any of the other female characters in any way that could be considered a meaningful conversation, and the only instances that, at a stretch, could come close, are still centred around a man. For these reasons, *Children of the Poor* does not pass the Bechdel Test.

### **Analysing *Children of the Poor* with questions inspired by the Kent Test**

*Children of the Poor* (Thompson) does not include well-rounded, thoughtful representations of race and gender, and also perpetuates harmful stereotypes. It is written in a dramatic style that deliberately under-develops character, with the exception of Albany, so that the actors can change quickly between roles; as mentioned in the Author's Note, "The chorus must be able to move with lightning speed, and be infinitely flexible" (Thompson, 13). Susan Battye describes how, "For Thompson, the key aspect of a play text was the narrative or story values rather than the development of character. He felt character-based theatre was a kind of 'mask wearing' offering the actors safety" (Battye, 117). I would argue that in a school setting, where students are getting accustomed to theatre, many for the first time, offering the actors a mask of safety through character-based theatre is not something that should be shied away from as it may offer benefits to students who may have low confidence or are just beginning to engage with theatre.

This style of under-developed characters is also a recipe for portraying stereotypes, as exemplified by the character 'Chinese Man' who is shown briefly in a scene organising to receive sexual favours from Rose and making sexual comments to Albany; he also appears in the vaudeville scene as mentioned above. This is the only ethnicity specified in the character list and Thompson does not offer any specifics within the script that would mean his ethnicity needed to be specified – no aspects of Chinese culture are mentioned, though possibly the playwright's intention in specifying ethnicity was so that the Chinese accent could be used to differentiate this character from the other under-developed characters portrayed by the chorus. 'Chinese Man' appears only in the scenes mentioned as an antagonist to the main characters and is not redeemed or expanded by the end of the play.

Another sexist line that perpetuates harmful gender stereotypes occurs when Albany is working at the print factory. His boss, Grimes, approaches Albany and points out that he is 'botching' his job of feeding paper into the machine. Despite Albany's claim that he is doing his best, Grimes snaps back, "Bull's arse. You're one of the worst feeders I've ever had. (*Sneering*) Like a girl having a few days 'off colour'" (Thompson, 93). This comment is derogatory towards women, implying that going through menstruation affects a woman's ability to do her job, and that she is somehow less valuable at that time of the month. It also normalises using comparison to a woman going through menstruation as an insult, which, whether intended as an antagonist's negative character trope or not, is not beneficial to a young generation to see modelled or have to play on stage.

Another harmful stereotype is shown through the character of 'Sex Boy'. This gender stereotype of a boy who only approaches women for sexual favours is potentially harmful to all genders, especially to young people who may be impressionable, and does not promote positive interaction between genders. The character appears after Albany has gathered a gang of boys together to hang out. The narrators announce that while the boys discussed sex, "In matters of sex, Albany was the Duncel/ In matters of sex, Rose (*they all rise and look at her*) was Beyond Her Years." Rose is then approached by the character 'Sex Boy' who suggestively asks her, "(*Mates in the background*) How would you like to earn some money?" to which she replies "No thank you. (*Turns away.*)" Albany is astounded that Rose turned down the offer to earn some money, and remarks "I would if I were a girl [...] I wish I were a girl [...] I'd take the money." Rose has an aside, "(*To audience, arm around Albany's shoulder*) He would have too, undoubtedly. The things which money could buy glittered in front of him. Rose seemed guilty of the most monumental stupidity!" (Thompson, 60). This attitude towards women and sex implies a naive view that suggests women should sell their bodies so that they can afford expensive things and fails to acknowledge the complexities and emotions that come with engaging in such an act.

The play also has an element of victim-blaming, that is a harmful trope to perpetuate. Albany reminisces on Rose's interactions with 'Sex Boy' later in the play, after an event at the print factory he worked at. One of the women who works there asks him how old he is. When he answers that he's thirteen, she says "(*Giggling*) "Thirteen, eh? Now let's see!" / *Suddenly the WOMEN have him down. One holds his legs, another his trunk. The third goes for his trousers.*" Woman 3 later remarks, "He's as slippery as an eel!" (*They get ALBANY's trousers off and examine his penis.*)" Afterwards, Woman 1 announces "Nah, he's not a man!" (Thompson, 90). After Albany's "*brutal loss of innocence*" (Thompson, 91) the narrators explain, "He couldn't say why/ But suddenly Porcello knew exactly what Rose had been doing all these years/ knowledge of her degradation came like a thunderclap" (Thompson, 91). These encounters, while creating uncomfortable situations for the actors, may also risk perpetuating harmful gender stereotypes, for both the female and male characters. When Albany experiences a similar derogatory sexual experience to Rose, he doesn't react with empathy, instead he assumes he knows exactly what she has gone through and offers judgement in the following conversation instead of support, saying, "You shouldn't stay out so late. It makes Mother cry" (Thompson, 91). This propensity to judge before understanding or offering empathy and blaming the victim for

their circumstances is another harmful trope that would need a great deal of unpacking and contextualisation if used with young people.

The female characters in this play do not have their own substantial narrative arc; it is very clear that the protagonist of this story is Albany, and that all the other characters, including the female characters, are included in the narrative to compliment his story and offer different perspectives or obstacles to him. The only named female character is Rose, and she is only featured intermittently, often to offer advice to or chastise Albany.

Rose's character arc is one without redemption, and one that puts her in many different and uncomfortable positions throughout the play, constantly deriving her position in her life within the play from her relationship to men. At one point she does find work at a biscuit factory, but this is short-lived as Albany soon finds out she has left that job and is back selling herself on the street. When he asks her to stop, saying it makes their mother cry, she replies, "Mother should keep her mouth shut. It's her fault what I do [...] Anyway, she can talk. What about her and that baker?" (Thompson, 91). This touches on the futility with which the women in this play are depicted, as if they are resigned to their fate and also shows how even though they are mother and daughter, they are not allies. The way the male and female characters describe each other is also derogatory, after Albany leaves his job and the opportunity of apprenticeship, he finds Rose and reflects on their relationship, "She's a whore, thought Albany, but once she sold herself to take me to the vaudeville" (97). The play offers no hope for its female characters, especially Rose, who in the final pages, where each character describes their fate, says she, "would not survive. A flower of the gutter, she had bloomed a short while, but besmirched, contaminated, soon she would be dead" (Thompson, 112). I found Rose's character arc not only shocking, but entirely hopeless with not much in the way of a moral lesson or glimmer of redemption for her situation. It seemed that some of Rose's experiences in her narrative arc, such as her interaction with 'Sex Boy' were included only so that Albany could offer his commentary on them, as described in the scene above.

*Children of the Poor* (Thompson) does not include reciprocal, meaningful interaction between characters of different ethnicities. As mentioned above, the only character with a different specified ethnicity was 'Chinese Man' and the only scenes he was featured in were the scene where Rose arranges to give sexual favours to him in exchange for money to afford vaudeville tickets, and then briefly again during Molly Malone's suggestive performance of 'Miss Muffet' to

further emphasise the shame associated with the actions Rose took with him. The play offers many examples of how characters can interact with each other negatively with clear biases, but I struggled to find examples in the opposite category.

*Children of the Poor* (Thompson) not only overly sexualises and fetishises the female characters, especially Rose, as described in scenes above, but it also creates overtly sexual situations not just for the female characters, but for the only character of a specified ethnicity, 'Chinese Man', for the male characters and for the male protagonist too. Many of these hypersexualised scenes have been mentioned above, but another that exemplifies the way the protagonist was affected is through Albany's interactions with the Chaplain.

After Albany is caught with a revolver by the police, the Chaplain represents him in court. He is sentenced to six strokes of the birch and placed in the charge of the Chaplain, who also whips him with a leather belt. Then, once the Chaplain is finished with his violent punishment, he makes a sexual move on Albany. The Chaplain says "there is hope, my son, the wild beast has been driven – (He breaks off. A different kind of intensity has been awakened) Have you ever been with a girl, Albany?" (105). When Albany replies no, the Chaplain continues,

Never, eh? Oh Albany, it is right, it is just, the Lord saith – (He is on top of ALBANY) Make love to me, Albany, do you feel it there? Do you want to see it? Yes? Yes? (ALBANY breaks away, the CHAPLAIN pursues) I'll find you work, boy. I'll protect you from the police. From yourself. No more floggings, boy, just you and me, yes? (Thompson, 106)

Albany manages to get away by threatening to tell everyone in Dunedin about the Chaplain's floggings, which is a clear parallel to Rose being shamed for her own interactions with men. This is emphasised by the chorus line, "(*mimicking CHINESE MAN, echo*) Have a cup of tea, leetle boy" (Thompson, 106), immediately after the Chaplain tells Albany to get dressed. While I acknowledge that theatre can be a powerful way to portray dark themes and shock an audience, I would argue that more thought needs to be put into choosing plays for young people to perform, and into the potential impact of exploring overly sensitive topics, especially a traumatic subject such as sexual assault, in a high school drama classroom. One respondent in my survey mentioned that "there were some people who joined our class later or weren't as passionate about theatre who I think were taken aback by the level of ambition and wished for a more easy-going

space, just wanted to enjoy acting or the experience of putting on a play without the same level of confrontation.” I understand that this play is trying to raise awareness about the negative effects of poverty on both male and female characters; however, to go into such graphic detail as to have an attempted sexual assault acted out on stage could be triggering for any students who have experienced any kind of similar situation.

Arguably, the intent of focusing on the negative situations created by poverty in this play is to emphasise the need for change, as the characters ask in some of their final lines, “Are the things of which I tell inevitable? [...] Will there always be Children of the Poor, even to the Last Generations? [...] Is there nothing that can be changed!!?” (Thompson, 113). However, the way this is theatricalised in the play leaves the imagining of *how* things *could* be different to the audience to contemplate after they have left the theatre. This does not necessarily mean the students will be stimulated to see how things could be different themselves. Many standards prescribe that students perform only part of a play, or if they perform a whole play, not all characters are necessarily on stage the whole time in order to experience the reason behind this message. For these reasons, *Children of the Poor* (Thompson) does overly sexualise the characters, and because of this, may not create empowering experiences for the students who perform in the play.

The female characters within *Children of the Poor* (Thompson) are often included as a guide to, or as objects for judgement by the main male protagonist; they are not afforded the character trait of being developed enough to be competition for the male characters. They may offer sage, all-knowing advice, such as when Rose and Albany meet after the women at the print factory sexually violate him, Rose says as “(a young Cassandra) I can see exactly what will happen to you. And me. (Urgently) You’ve got to stay straight Albany. Otherwise...” (92). The stage direction is a reference to the Trojan priestess Cassandra in Greek Mythology, who was fated by the god Apollo to utter true prophecies but never to be believed. This seems to be the case for many of the female characters, as they often offer advice to Albany, which he does not take or does not believe.

The only scene that may show some sense of females being competition may be at the print factory, when Grimes points out Albany has ‘botched’ the paper feeding and makes his sexist comment about Albany’s mistake, he asks a woman who works at the factory to “Take over this machine! Porcello here isn’t capable!” (94). Albany feels shame at having his job taken over, and

the comments from Grimes emphasise that this is made more bitter by the fact it was taken over by a woman.

This leads to a section where Albany is shamed by the women at the factory when they find out Rose goes out with men for money, climaxing in Albany's choice to leave his promising apprenticeship at the print factory. This is an example of slut-shaming and arguably isn't productive or healthy for young people to be exposed to or act out. The women are portrayed as an antagonistic force in this scene, and are only established in this way, they do not offer Albany any other valuable or beneficial experience within the play, and like many other women in the play, they are not allowed the character trait of being competition for the male characters.

As mentioned above, *Children of the Poor* (Thompson) does not fully develop any of the supplementary characters; they are all included in the story to aid, educate, or hinder the main character and do not have their own agency within the play. One may argue that Rose does show some agency by defying her mother and brother and continuing her illicit activities, but that would be ignoring that it is also clearly established in the script that the reason she turns to such activities is because of her circumstances, and not because that is what she wants to do.

### **Analysing *Children of the Poor* with questions inspired by my own research**

The Characters in *Children of the Poor* (Thompson) are not modelling empowerment or behaving in ways that offer role-models for young people to learn confidence. Albany does face adversity, and there is a sense that he tries to persist against it, but the emphasis is on how bad the events he goes through are instead of how well his coping mechanisms and actions help him get through them. In the final lines of the play, after listing all of the disappointing fates of the Porcello family, Rose voices Albany's question, asking "Are the things of which I tell inevitable?" Albany elaborates, "Was I, was my Sister, vicious even in our Mother's womb?" (113). These lines emphasise the futility that these characters feel but puts the onus on the audience to decide what can be done about it. Instead of using theatre as a way to explore how things could be better, this play focusses on recreating negative situations to prove how bad they are.

While the children in the Porcello family are close in age to the students who would be performing them, the issues they face in the play are not relatable and do not offer relevant coping mechanisms for students to use in their own lives. Themes are often overwhelmingly dark, negative, mature, sexual, or violent as this play deals with themes of sexual harassment such as

Sex Boy's interaction with Rose or Albany's interaction with the Chaplain, prostitution by Rose and her mother, infant death when Albany's Mother gives birth to his sister and she passes away soon after, violence in Albany's brutal whippings, and crime in Albany's interactions with the street gang. While the ensuing consequences, emotional impact, and punishment for Albany are acknowledged, they are not shown in the play with empathy, but rather with an attitude that emphasises the futility of Albany's plight.

The characters in *Children of the Poor* (Thompson) do *resist* their struggles and are able to make some progress away from poverty – Rose gets a job at a biscuit factory; Albany is to be apprenticed – but they usually take one step forward and two steps back as the focus of the play is to show them being beaten down by their struggles to raise awareness of the plight of the working class. Rose only works at the biscuit factory for a short while and Albany leaves his job at the print factory before he can be apprenticed. Those who cause harm to other characters do not receive a come-uppance, instead it is Albany who is arrested and punished for possessing a gun instead of instead of the 'Chinese Man' for receiving sexual favours from an 11-year-old girl, or the Chaplain character who sexually assaults Albany.

The gender of the characters in *Children of the Poor* (Thompson) is specified as binary and the plot would be difficult to achieve with an open interpretation that challenged notions of gender or allowed representation for non-binary characters. The story is very male-centric and may be affected by altering the gender of characters, especially the main characters, as the play is set in the 1930s, and many of the interactions between male and female characters exemplify the outdated attitudes towards gender of the time. Case challenged the classic literary canon and asked whether playwrights like Shakespeare should still be studied widely when the world they portrayed on stage was one that was devoid of female input during the creation process (27). Similarly, Thompson's play is not open enough for interpretation to readily allow for diverse representation on stage.

The play does feature a large ensemble cast which is a feature of its Epic Theatre style, which "uses didactic, loosely connected scenes and interruptions where the audience is addressed directly with analysis, argument or documentation" (Battye, 116). However, due to the extremely large cast and frequency with which the chorus must move between characters, many of the characters included in the smaller scenes are only there to impact the main protagonist and are not developed characters within themselves. This could mean that students playing the smaller roles

may not feel they are contributing much to the story overall. One of the respondents from my survey noted that their least favourite role they played during high school drama was “A side role in *Children of the Poor* playing a smaller brother. The casting was strange and it was a set dress role” while another noted a negative experience where “I had to [split] the already tiny role with someone else i.e. having two people play one character”. In a classroom setting, students often want to feel like they have their own character that is important in some way to the story, and due to the vast number of under-developed side roles in this play, it creates few opportunities for students to feel they are playing a well-developed character with their own arc/ goals that contribute to the story, with the possible exception of the main male protagonist, Albany, though in some productions I have even seen this role double cast.

*Children of the Poor* (Thompson) does follow a bildungsroman structure as it is the story of Albany growing up and coming of age; however, there is only a minimal sense of hope developed by the end, in the sense that Albany survives. As Susan Battye points out in the Study Notes, “As he says at the outset, ‘This is the story of how I became a thief and an outlaw.’ There is no mystery here; the audience cannot fall into the trap of pretending they do not know what will happen to the central character. We know from the beginning it will be a tragedy” (Battye, 117). While Albany does grow up and come of age, this story is not one with a happy ending, or a sense of hope: it is a tragedy throughout.

When the play does raise minimal hope, such as his mother’s dream to visit Glasgow, it is only to have it dashed. Each time Albany raises a question of hope, he is dashed by the people around him. He asks his mother, “Is Glasgow like Dunedin?” to which she replies, “To the poor, all places are the same” (Thompson, 24). This is not resolved by the end, instead it describes how “Mother would struggle on, ever more deaf and broken. She would never get to Scotland, no, not even to see her Birthplace” (Thompson, 112). It places emphasis on futility and defeat, and while it does suggest Albany resists his negative circumstances, Albany’s attitude is often that he is doomed before he has started. This section, read by Narrators and the Porcello family as Albany is about to leave on a train for prison exemplifies this doomed attitude, “The World was against him/ The Lash had wounded his Flesh/ Futility had wounded his Soul [...] Rebellion was useless/ And yet he would continue to rebel./ He would resist./ And be punished in perpetuity” (Thompson, 113). The only hope that it does suggest is that Albany survives, “And one day he would tell his story!” (Thompson, 113); however, this play only raises awareness of issues, without offering hope or ways to help solve them.

The characters in *Children of the Poor* (Thompson) are not positive role models for dealing with emotions. Often, they are faced with overwhelmingly negative circumstances and situations, and due to the fast-paced nature of scenes, often the characters are not given time within the script to express their emotions or work through them in a healthy way. For example, 'Sex boy' is only introduced for a brief scene where he asks Rose for a sexual favour, allowing Albany to work out his opinions on her refusal to take part. Sex Boy shows frustration when he is refused, and then does not appear again within the play. For Albany, the narrative story seems to be a cumulation of negative experiences that never seem to be resolved before the next negative event occurs, and are not resolved by the end, other than suggesting Albany still has a futile desire to persist and rebel. Therefore, the characters do not offer positive ways to deal with emotions and so could not be considered role-models for young people in that way.

There is minimal room for the actors to have creative interpretation in the creation of characters or their portrayal within this play. My copy is accompanied by a lengthy 'Author's Note' which explains Thompson's own approach to the play and how he would like it staged, with prescriptions such as "it is the job of the chorus to provide music, sound effects, character, atmosphere, focus, and, above all, a sense of participation in Albany's life journey. In short, the chorus creates the world of the play, and does this with minimal props and costumes" (Thompson, 13). There is some freedom allowed in the way that the actor can play Albany, as Thompson notes, "More often than not the transitions can be taken as quickly as they would be in a modern film. But the actor playing Albany will need to decide at which points he is swept along by it all and at which points he needs to slow down and take the focus which is rightfully his" (Thompson, 14). However, the way other characters are written leaves little room for students to add their own individuality when interpreting them, or to add improvisations or input in the process.

*Wednesday to Come* (Renée) was a stark contrast to *Children of the Poor* (Thompson). Despite dealing with similarly sensitive themes such as class, poverty, and a death in the family that is revealed to be suicide due to conditions in the working camps, Renée writes her characters in a way that allows their strength to shine against the dark backdrop of 1930s depression in Aotearoa New Zealand. This play is suggested for the level 3 drama performance standard "Modern Magic" meaning that students around the age of 18 are likely to perform it. The play follows four women from four different generations within the same family and looks at how they cope with the death of Ben, Iris's husband and Jeannie's and Cliff's father, as a hunger march by

unemployed workers goes past their family home halfway between Palmerston North and Wellington. It is clear that this is an ensemble cast as each character is equally essential to the story, though Iris may be considered the lead of the group due to her close relation to the central themes of the play and her weighting of lines.

### **Does *Wednesday to Come* pass the Bechdel Test?**

*Wednesday to Come* (Renée) passes the Bechdel Test easily, as not only does the script feature six well-developed female characters, they also interact with each other and have many conversations throughout the play, the subject of which usually does not involve a man. For example, when Jeannie first enters, the women immediately acknowledge her and Granna asks, “What day is it Jeannie?” to which Jeannie replies, “Monday Granna” before “*she runs quickly to her room, upset*” (7). Mary senses tensions are high but sets the tone of getting on with it by delegating household tasks to the rest of the family, allowing them to perform an action while they are processing their emotions. She says, “*indicating a pile of finished ironing: Cliff put these in the basket. She starts ironing the sheets/ CLIFF puts the mouth organ in his pocket and takes the ironing out./ How about some tea Iris? Jeannie! Make some tea, there’s a good girl./ Jeannie comes in drying her eyes.*” Jeannie resists, but Mary persists, saying “Tea’ll do you good” (7), and eventually Jeannie makes and serves tea to all the adults, allowing her to feel like she is involved and helpful, despite being resistant at first. This interaction, while brief, sets the tone for the interactions of the women throughout the play. They acknowledge each other and support each other to take actions that will benefit and help them process the intense grief and emotion they are all feeling.

The play offers eight characters in total, all named and six of whom--Iris, Jeannie, Mary, Granna, Dot and Molly--are women. Non-binary interpretations are possible, as indicated by a recent production directed by Erina Daniels (discussed in more detail below). The topic of their conversations is often ways to help each other cope with the traumatic event that has taken place in their family, as each character deals with their emotions differently, and how to guide each other towards healthy ways of processing. Mary, Iris’s mother is very attentive to the family, often slipping caring lines into conversation and steering interactions away from conflict; she can sense that Iris is angry and doesn’t want her to misdirect her anger towards family members who are also hurting. When Mary senses tensions rising between Cliff and Iris in a conversation about money, Mary steps in and reminds Iris, “Quietly girl. It’s not their fault” (10). Mary has seen her

own loss as Iris describes when Mary decides to make scones, “I remember when Dad died we stayed up all night. About one in the morning Mum made some scones. Crazy the things you do-” to which Ted replies, “Like singing around a coffin?” (19). Conversations such as these highlight the different ways each character deals with their grief. The play does not shy away from the negative emotions that come with an experience such as this, but it clearly shows how the family helps to steer each other back towards healthy outlets when they sense another character is giving in to those negative drives. For these reasons, *Wednesday to Come* (Renée) does pass the Bechdel test.

### **Analysing *Wednesday to Come* with questions inspired by the Kent Test**

All the characters in *Wednesday to Come* (Renée) are well-developed and believable; they do not rely on caricature, stereotype, or tropes to convey character. This is partly due to each of the character’s clear goals and needs (even if they are not quite aware of what those needs are), and the ways they interact and support each other to pursue those goals and needs. Characters are treated with respect in the way they are developed, and even Granna, the great-grandmother to Cliff and Jeannie, who is shown battling Alzheimer’s disease which affects her memory, is still shown in a way that allows her to be respected by the other characters and to offer perspectives integral to the story.

Though the play does not specify the ethnicity of the characters, it is written to be open enough for interpretation that the characters could be any ethnicity that would fit into a 1930s Aotearoa New Zealand setting. In a recent production in 2022, director Erina Daniels (Ngātiwai) created a unique interpretation where she

revives and revitalises *Wednesday to Come* with tangata whenua in the cast – arguably reflecting the autobiographical elements Renée has drawn on, more authentically than the many all-Pākehā casts that have memorably honoured the work over the decades. In this iteration, Pākehā Granna Jeannie (Jane Waddell) has married into a Māori whānau, producing the next three generations of wāhine toa who now share the modest family whare in Ōtaki: her daughter Mary (Grace Hoete), granddaughter Iris ([Ni] Dekkers-Reihana) and great-granddaughter Jeannie (Mia van Oyen) – plus her great grandson Cliff (Reon Bell). (Smythe, 2022)

This shows how versatile the script is and that while it does not specify the ethnicity of the women, this offers scope for flexible interpretation. Other aspects of this performance included integrating pieces of Māori culture into scenes, such as a traditional Māori cloak which was hung on the clothesline alongside the washing the women were doing as work throughout the performance and was laid to rest on top of Ben's coffin when it was carried out at the end. Characters were also seen washing their hands when leaving the room with Ben's coffin, "Māori consider that urupā (burial grounds) or cemeteries are tapu (sacred) and that tapu is removed by washing hands on departure" (McManus and Du Plessis) and integrating this into the performance seamlessly added an extra element of culture that wasn't outrightly written into the script.

Each character in *Wednesday to Come* (Renée) has their own narrative arc, as they are all affected differently by the tragic event that has befallen the family, and as the play progresses, they each find ways to process their complex reactions, and move through their grief; they are not included just to 'hold down' a male protagonist's story. While some may argue that Ben is the centre of this story, as his actions cause the unfolding drama of the play, I would suggest that his actions are secondary to the actions of the women in his family, who rally together and draw strength from each other to deal with the consequences of Ben's actions.

Each of the characters has a clear goal: Granna wants to be included in the family and to be taken seriously despite her memory being affected by her disease; Mary wants to support her family and steer them away from harmful coping mechanisms, while making sure they have the space or attention they need to process their emotions; Iris wants to find closure, and allow her children the opportunity to grieve their father in healthy ways and find closure too (she also doesn't want to be told what to do); Cliff wants to play his mouth organ and feel close to his father through the music, while supporting his sister and mother; Jeannie wants to be included and feel she is helping her family, which they each support her to do in their own way; Ted wants to minimise the devastation from the news, but he can't see at first that this holds the family back from being able to find closure; Molly wants to be acknowledged as part of Ted's life, and though Iris is resistant, Molly asserts what she feels needs to be said; finally, Dot wants to support the family by bringing awareness to the situations at the relief camps that caused Ben to take his life and brought such unrest to his family. In a way this is the story of how the women in Ben's family persist and learn to cope with losing the man of their family, at a time when a woman's relationship to a man meant stability for her and her family. The family does not allow the event

to break them or to even cause their hope to waver; they do as many families do, they get on with it and they cope. Each character has a similar goal within the narrative, which at the simplest level, is to process what has happened.

*Wednesday to Come* has the potential to include meaningful interaction between characters of different ethnicities. The play does not specify that any of the characters are of a certain ethnicity, but as mentioned above, this is due to the versatility of the script and its ability to be interpreted as roles for characters of different ethnicities. In the 2022 production I saw in Wellington, many of the family members were played by Māori actors and the script benefitted from the mana they brought to their characters and to the production. The review of the production mentioned earlier also praised the different ethnic interpretation as allowing the actors to draw more meaning from their characters' actions. "Hannah Kelly personifies Molly's thoughtless claiming of Pākehā privilege and entitlement, while Amanda Noblett's gently [sic] but determined Dot fully embodies the manaakitanga of tikanga Māori" (Smythe). The script allowed many opportunities for meaningful interaction between characters, and so when characters were played by actors who brought their own culture to the role, opportunities arose for meaningful interaction between characters of different ethnicities.

*Wednesday to Come* (Renée) avoids over-sexualising or fetishising the characters as none of the characters are shown in physically compromising situations on stage. The characters do talk about relationships, particularly when the character Molly Nairn intrudes on the grieving family to voice her own grief, but the way they interact still allows each character space to say what they need to say, and they discuss their relationships with Ben without using graphic terms. When Iris reveals to Ted that Ben has been unfaithful with Molly, she says, "Don't look so shocked Ted, you knew Ben was carrying on with Molly Nairn. Half the neighbourhood knew." To which Molly replies, "It wasn't like that. He just wanted someone to talk to, have a bit of fun with. Nothing more than that" (22). Both characters resist anger and manage to talk in productive terms about their relationship to Ben, without reverting to using derogatory language. The characters are not treated in a way that compromises their character development or creates sexually intimate or uncomfortable scenes for the actors involved.

*Wednesday to Come* (Renée) features many developed characters who are included in the story because they make meaningful contributions to the overall narrative, not because they are framed as competition for a male character. The female characters, especially Iris, hold their own against

the male characters, shown by the way Ted often disagrees with Iris's actions; instead of being passive, Iris asserts her power by either putting Ted back in his place or defying his advice. This can be seen clearly in the scene where Iris wants Ted to get her a hammer to open Ben's coffin. Iris says, "What the hell are we supposed to do Ted? See our kids starve? Or do we grovel? Not much of a choice is it?" To which he replies, "It's the depression Iris. Everyone's in the same boat." But Iris doesn't take his opinion when she doesn't agree with it, she counters, "Are they? Then how is it that some people get their washing and ironing done and other people have to do it?" Ted replies, "It's just the-way it is -" to which Iris retorts, "Well, it's wrong." Ted tries to change the subject, saying, "Have some tea Iris" but Iris maintains her prerogative and says, "You get the hammer Ted and I'll have some tea" (15). This shows how Iris has power in the situation and does not compromise her needs or opinions because another character doesn't agree with them. This is just one example of how the feminine characters stand up to the masculine characters, and could be considered competition, but not as their *only* personality trait.

All of the female characters have their own agency, and the only character who engages in self-sacrificing behaviour would be Ben before the outset of the play. Some of the reasons for his sacrifice (such as the working conditions and the harness that broke Ben's spirit) are explored in the play, though the consequences of his self-sacrifice on his family are also made clear. Iris often acts with agency, and this illuminates how other characters also act with agency to differing degrees. This can be seen in the way that Iris stands up to Ted throughout the play, and also in the way Jeannie absorbs and mirrors this agency, when she speaks to Ted about choosing to go on the hunger march. This play does not show characters taking part in self-sacrificing behaviour, but it makes the consequences of this behaviour abundantly clear, acknowledging the pain and grief while also keeping a strong sense of hope alive.

### **Analysing *Wednesday to Come* with questions inspired by my own research**

There are many situations within *Wednesday to Come* that allow the characters to model empowerment and the actors to learn confidence through the character's actions within a scene. Most notably is how Iris constantly stands up to Ted during the play. Numerous times, Ted voices his opinions on how the family should grieve, but Iris always stands up to him, carefully telling him why his awkward but well-intentioned desire to keep the family from feeling too much grief is hindering their ability to properly grieve. Iris ignores Ted's wishes for her not to open Ben's coffin, and when he finds out, he says, "It was just... Thought it was too much... for you and the

kids... but..." Iris finishes his sentence, "But I wouldn't be told. All those years ago that was really why you didn't approve of me, wasn't it? You knew I wouldn't be told and you didn't like it" (41). Iris is sure of herself and models empowerment by assertively taking the actions she needs to take in order to find her own closure and come to terms with the event. She is not overly rude or combative with Ted, she simply tells him when he is not making helpful comments and then does what is best for her family, regardless.

Jeannie is another character who learns to stand up for herself during the play. At the beginning of act two, Jeannie helps with the dishes, at which point she chooses to talk to her Mum about the mouth organ that belonged to her father. Up until this point, Jeannie has been quiet, diligent, and helpful, but she realises that there is something else tangible that *she* needs for closure, and so she asks her Mum, "Can I have his mouth organ?" To which Iris replies, "Cliff's already asked" (28). Jeannie is put out, but persists, explaining "I do my jobs don't I? [...] Look after Granna? [...] I'm trying to find work, do my share" (28) but Iris is distracted and doesn't realise how much it means to Jeannie to ask for this token. Jeannie is not put off by the situation, she makes it clear to Iris that she feels left out if her father's mouth organ is given to Cliff, "You shouldn't have let Cliff have Dad's mouth organ when he's got one of his own" (28). Eventually Granna distracts Jeannie into playing a game of cards and the conversation is dropped without Iris agreeing to give Jeannie Ben's mouth organ; however, the subject is picked up again later, when the mouth organ is found. The very last moment of the play, as the family is leaving with Ben's coffin, Jeannie stops and says, "Just a minute" (50) before going back into the house to retrieve her father's mouth organ off the table. Then she turns to face the world, having taken the thing she needed for herself.

There are parallels between Jeannie's desire and eventual acquiring of the mouth organ and the line Granna says when explaining the reasons behind her own political march. Jeannie asks, "What was it about?" and Granna replies, "What it's always about, Jeannie. It's about asking and getting told no for an answer. And then asking a bit louder and a bit louder. And then – sometimes – if you're lucky – you get a little of what you asked for and then – it starts all over again. And you wonder – you do Jeannie – do they ever listen?" (40). Jeannie follows this process with the mouth organ. She begins by asking nicely and listing all the reasons why she should get the mouth organ, but her plea is overshadowed by the circumstances surrounding her family, and though they don't deliberately try to deny her what she's asking, the family is swept back up into the action before confirming Jeannie can have the mouth organ. By then end, Jeannie has grown

in confidence, she realises that she can take action without being given permission. When Ted makes a negative comment about Jeannie joining the hunger march and the purpose of it in general, she replies “We’re going to bring the plight of the underprivileged to public notice – [...] It’s true! Uncle Ted, we can’t go on like this. I want to do something – I don’t want to stay at home and take whatever comes. And I’m not going to” (46). This is the moment Jeannie voices her opinions with new-found confidence. Her character arc has been building to this moment throughout the play, and her comments show hope for the future by suggesting action. Any student who performs this role has the opportunity to learn confidence from Jeannie’s actions, by seeing the way she develops her confidence and eventually stands up to take action for what she believes. In these ways, the characters model empowerment and allow the actors who play them to learn confidence through their vicarious experiences.

While the cast does encompass a diverse age range, the two children of Iris are of similar age to the students who would be performing the roles in a classroom production, and so the struggles they face may be considered relatable to the age group. While the period the play is set in is different to today’s society, there are clear parallels that would resonate for students today, such as Jeannie and Iris’s mother-daughter dynamic and Jeannie learning to navigate teenagerhood and assert the maturity needed to gain permission to take part in certain activities, such as walking in the hunger march. There is also much to gain in perspective and insight from playing the older characters, because they are written in such a way that their goals and obstacles are clear enough that a student could understand them, without having lived experience of being an older person.

Some might argue that the central theme of suicide is too heavy for young people to discuss, and I do agree that some plays approach such heavy subjects in non-productive ways. However, *Wednesday to Come* (Renée) approaches this subject with empathy for the people left behind, it does not normalise, rationalise, or sensationalise Ben’s act of taking his own life, instead it acknowledges that the trauma of such an act affects more people than just the person who took their own life and explores some ways that characters may learn to cope. In Aotearoa New Zealand, we have “One of the highest youth suicide rates in the OECD” (Mental Health Foundation). Given mental health is a big issue for our young people, using theatre to explore how people are affected and how they cope in healthy ways, with the distance of playing a character, could benefit students in learning healthy perspectives and positive ways to manage their mental health.

One of the main differences between the two plays is the way that they present the sensitive subject matter and themes. The focus of *Wednesday to Come* (Renée) is to show how the characters resist being beaten down by their struggles and display strength and role-model qualities by facing them and continuing to persist against adversity. *Children of the Poor* (Thompson) emphasises the traumatic events that the characters experience, making them a feature and allowing their negative effects to permeate the play. This feels shocking at first but eventually the characters, and arguably the audience, appear desensitized through repetition, with the play offering no solution to the problems raised. *Wednesday to Come* (Renée) in contrast focusses on the impact that the traumatic event had on the people it affected and how they found ways to cope and get through.

*Wednesday to Come* (Renée) does not focus on the traumatic event itself—Ben is a character who is only talked about, we do not see him take his own life—but on envisioning a future beyond tragedy. When Iris opens Ben’s coffin, she speaks to him, saying, “See, you’re going to miss out on a lot of things. Cliff and Jeannie growing up... You taught Cliff well – he’s going to be the best, and he won’t forget you – neither will Jeannie, she’s going to be the best too” (37). The emphasis is more on how the characters cope than on how bad the events they are going through are. As Iris says,

I grew up when I was twelve. Took me six months. And nothing was ever quite the same again. It’s going to be the same with Cliff and Jeannie, only for them it’s a few days. So I suppose I should thank you. But I’m not grateful. You see, what you don’t understand is that we all have our harnesses. And most of us survive somehow (38).

When the climax of the play is reached, and the family finds Ben’s harness and learns it was used when there was a “Shortage of horses. Someone had to pull the plough” (31), it is enough to simply picture this in our imaginations. We do not need to see a character dehumanised by wearing the harness, because seeing the realisation by the other characters and their reactions is intensely emotional. The characters not only support each other to process their grief, but also find productive ways to raise awareness of the bad circumstances at the relief camps, such as taking part in the hunger march, so that other families may benefit from the support of ones who have been through similar hardship. Therefore, although *Wednesday to Come* (Renée) explores heavy themes, it does so in an empathetic and constructive way, and so does include age-

appropriate struggles for the age group that would be performing it as part of their NCEA standard

The script for *Wednesday to Come* (Renée) is versatile and open for interpretation, enough to allow for diverse representation on stage. The Author's note included at the front of my copy of the script is a brief note made up of two paragraphs, suggesting that "the life of this household goes on during the action of the play" and mentioning that Cliff's organ playing should have a "bluesy sound" (Renée, 6). There are no stipulations about the way this play *should* be performed, and because it is based from a foundation of character, there is much about this script that can be open for interpretation.

While attitudes about gender at the time this play is set are much more rigid than what is accepted today, the play is written in a way that allows characters to be open for interpretation in some aspects of gender. In the 2022 production I saw, Iris was played by a non-binary actor— Ni Dekkers-Reihana—who brought gender fluidity to the role in a way that complimented the performance. Though costuming is not mentioned in the author's note, often Iris has been dressed as a 1930s housewife in production, wearing feminine clothing such as a skirt or tight-fitting dress. However, it is my understanding that the performance I watched was the first professional production that featured the character, Iris, wearing pants. This showed the benefit of allowing different interpretations of character, as not only did the image of Iris wearing pants evoke her masculinity, but it emphasised the fact that she is now taking on the dual role of mother and father to her two children and 'wearing the pants' in their family. Allowing a more non-binary interpretation of character added to the performance and not only allowed the actor to show fierce connection to the character when portraying her on stage but added complexity and depth to the overall performance. This is just one example of how the script is open and can be interpreted in creative ways that benefit the script and help to diversify representation on stage.

*Wednesday to Come* (Renée) features a strong ensemble cast, where all the characters are well-developed and are written with their own clear goals and obstacles that allow both the audience and the actor to understand and connect with the characters. All characters are offered a significant amount of time on stage, either physically present, or being talked about in the conversations of others, often the topic of which is how to help the character in question cope. Each character is well-developed and makes significant contributions to the story – even characters who have fewer speaking lines, like Cliff, are given opportunities to engage and be

present in the story through music and playing the mouth organ. This reminded me of the interviewee (see Chapter Two) who engaged with their school production of a dark-themed play by composing music and playing electric guitar; they found they could remove themselves from the bleak context of the play, and even found a passion composing music for theatre that they wanted to pursue beyond high school. This suggests to me that while the script has a range of differently sized acting roles, there has still been care taken to ensure each character has a strong connection to the central story, and to allow for actors to engage with the script in different creative ways, giving the impression of a strong, diverse, ensemble cast.

While the play is not a classic bildungsroman structure, it does follow the two younger characters, Cliff and Jeannie, into adulthood. Students may learn from Jeannie in particular, who begins as a quiet, naïve young girl but as the play progresses, gains confidence and raises her own political consciousness. By the end, she chooses to take part in the hunger march, and through her desire, sparks action and change within the family. Each of the women in the family learns something by the end of the play, often things about themselves, even if it is just surprising themselves with their own strength and resilience and their ability to cope. In this way, while the whole play may not be centred around a bildungsroman structure, each of the characters has a narrative arc that loosely follows the bildungsroman structure, as they are all going through a time of major upheaval and learning about themselves and the ways they cope as they go through it.

The characters in *Wednesday to Come* (Renée) are positive role models for dealing with emotions as each make space for the others to process, giving full credence to all their situations, and encouraging each other to process emotions in healthy ways. Iris's two children, Jeannie and Cliff, are affected by the loss in the family, despite their young ages of thirteen and fifteen respectively. Iris allows them to process their grief in whatever ways benefit them, even though her brother-in-law Ted often points out that he "can't understand [why Iris is] letting them go on like this – they're too young" (18). When Ted suggests that he doesn't think Iris should encourage Cliff to play the mouth organ as he thinks it reminds everyone of his father who also played, Iris retorts, "Playing's his way of saying goodbye... What would you rather he did? Take to his bed and have bad dreams? This way he'll get it out of his system" (18). The ways the characters advocate for each other and allow each other to process their feelings models many different and healthy ways to process grief. However, it doesn't sugar-coat their reactions or allow other characters to interrupt their process.

For Jeannie, one coping mechanism is to help and to feel included, and both Mary and Iris make sure she has every opportunity to do so. Even though Ted insists that the children are too young to take part in the grieving process, Iris argues back that it will affect them anyway and it would be better for them to be able to process it. When Iris's temper gets heated talking about finances, Jeannie's line and stage direction, "*wanting to help Mum*" (10), are enough for Mary to sense that Jeannie wants to feel included and to do whatever she can to help her family but also to stay busy. Soon after, Mary says, "I'll have that cup of tea now Jeannie" and when a van arrives outside, she instructs, "Clear the table Jeannie. Iris you stay there" (10). When the others leave to bring in Ben's coffin, Jeannie again wants to be helpful and asks, "Shall I get the shawl Mum?" (11). Instead of shutting her down or replying negatively, Iris replies, "Not yet" which allows Jeannie to keep hope that she might help later. In these ways, the characters are positive role models for dealing with emotions as they are attentive to each other and make space to process emotions while still giving full seriousness to the situation and offering support where possible to find healthy coping mechanisms.

The roles in *Wednesday to Come* create plentiful opportunities for the actors to have input in the way they interpret and choose to perform the characters. As shown above by the interpretation of the characters with different ethnicities and non-binary influences, *Wednesday to Come* is a versatile, open script that benefits from the creativity and the backgrounds of those involved in its production. It benefits from the uniqueness of those who inhabit its characters, rather than being limited by a prescribed, rigid method of interpretation and performance.

## Conclusions

I have argued, from my own experiences, primary interview research, overview of the plays set for 2021 standards, and two detailed case analyses, that much of the material suggested for study in high school drama in Aotearoa may be gender limited, and of a darker thematic nature, lacking role models that empower young people to feel they can change the world. I wanted to contribute to the field by suggesting some other positive criteria to focus on and include in the curriculum. I found it hard to find plays, even works with feminist themes, that reflected my idea of a feminist role-model character. Often feminism in theatre can be thought of as a double-edged sword, because to show the hardships and oppression women face, characters act out facing these hardships on stage. It is difficult to show the harm caused by inflexible patriarchal structures in a

theatrical setting, without having characters, and therefore actors, experiencing those harms on stage. I would like to contribute a more positive perspective by focussing on theatre that can be beneficial in creating strong female and nonbinary role models for young actors to perform onstage.

The critic Elinor Fuchs argues that a play can be perceived as its own planet: “A play is not a flat work of literature, not a description in poetry of another world, but is in itself another world passing before you in time and space” (Fuchs, 6). She uses this perspective to pose poignant questions about how to interpret a play, offering a wider focus to include not just characters or language, but space, time, mood, and social setting among others. She asks us to look at the play as a whole and the world it creates for its characters, before delving into the complexities of narrative structure and character development.

We must make the assumption that in the world of the play there are no accidents. Nothing occurs ‘by chance,’ not even chance. In that case, nothing in the play is without significance. Correspondingly, the play asks us to focus upon it a total awareness, to bring our attention and curiosity without the censorship of selective interpretation, ‘good taste,’ or ‘correct form.’ Before making judgments, we must ask questions. This is the deepest meaning of the idea, often-repeated but little understood, that the study of art shows us how to live. (Fuchs, 6)

This control over the world of the play that the playwright has, as described above, allows the writer to curate every aspect of the story they present and therefore add in subtle layers of meaning and significance through simple choices, beyond the words that the characters say. To me, Fuchs’ suggestions of how to begin the process of interpreting a play not only offer insights into the worlds of plays already written, but also offer inspiration for plays that are yet to come. If a playwright can become aware that they are in control of the entire world of the play, then the message being portrayed in their play may be more effectively conveyed to the audience because it is not being hindered by the playwright’s unintentional bias, and they can interrogate and curate each of their theatrical choices towards this purpose. In my case, I wanted to create a world in which gender stereotyping was openly addressed and young people could practise some of the skills they will need to deal with their families, friendships, emotions, and challenges in the real world, and experience, through the characters they play, a sense of their own power to create a

better, different world. The five plays presented in the next section aim to build a world that is not perfect but offers opportunities for change that are both fun and empowering. The characters face relatable challenges, but my aim was to show that, in each case, they hold the resources within themselves to triumph over adversity without resorting to conflict, fatalism, or fury.

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## Part B: Creative Works

# Play I: Gumballs, Music and Whatever's in the Box...

Gumballs, Music and Whatever's in the Box...

A short play

By Jessica Ramage

## SUMMARY

April is anxious. She is so anxious she hasn't opened the box that contains her item because she doesn't know if it will be good or bad. She is particularly anxious about the hike Irene, the camp coordinator, has planned for the camp participants. She thought she prepared for everything, but she couldn't have prepared to be paired with Bronte, a loud girl who carries a stereo that constantly blasts music that reflects how she's feeling, and Candy, the responsible one who always chews bubble-gum but has a secret. April couldn't have prepared for them to get lost on the hike, for her bag of supplies to fall down a cliff, for Bronte to eat all of Candy's gumballs, or for Candy's secret to be that she's diabetic. But are these dire circumstances just what April needs to build up the courage to face up to what she carries and save her friends?

## CHARACTERS

APRIL	A young woman, about 13, she is often anxious and indecisive. The item she carries is a large box that hides her face when she is holding it.
CANDACE (CANDY)	A very responsible young woman, about 13. The item she carries is a paper bag of gumballs which she eats every so often.
BRONTE	A very loud young woman, about 13. The item she carries is a boom-box stereo that plays different music depending on her mood. She cannot help but show how she is feeling.
IRENE	A woman in her fifties, she is the camp coordinator. The item she carries is steel.

## SETTING

Native Aotearoa New Zealand bush, not far from the Leadership camp for young people. Irene is taking participants of the camp out for a hike.

## TIME

Early morning, school holidays. A symbolic universe where people can see the things (pressures/ worries/ influences/ baggage) they carry around with them, which take the form of large cumbersome items unique to each person.

## SCENE 1

(A hiking track in the Aotearoa New Zealand bush, with one of those generic dark green and yellow signs with the track name and estimated time for completion. IRENE stands at the fork in the track. APRIL, CANDY and BRONTE sit cross-legged on the dirt track, complete with packs, water bottles and tramping gear, while IRENE explains the house-keeping rules of the tramp. BRONTE's stereo plays elevator music; she is bored. APRIL is hanging on IRENE's every word, carefully checking off each of the items in her pack as IRENE lists off a checklist. CANDY watches on uninterestedly, idly chewing bubblegum.)

IRENE

When you go tramping, even a day walk, you must take three days' supplies, just in case. You must carry a survival blanket, non-perishable food, sunhat, compass, bug-spray, whistle and most importantly, a water bottle; I hope you all filled them up at camp. There are no taps out here, and you can't drink the river water because the farmer next-door uses it for run-off.

(APRIL, who has been checking through her camping gear, takes out her water bottle and takes the tiniest sip she can, careful not to spill a single drop as she tenderly replaces the cap.)

Buddy up. Oh, we have an odd number, you'll have to be a three.

(IRENE points to APRIL, CANDY, and BRONTE. APRIL looks anxiously between CANDY and BRONTE. BRONTE groans, CANDY grins.)

BRONTE

Can't I go by myself? I just want to get this over with.

IRENE

No, Bronte. We can't have anyone wandering out there by themselves. The woods are a dangerous place, especially for young ladies. If you slip and hurt yourself, these two can blow their whistle for help.

APRIL

(Holding up her whistle)

I've got my whistle, Miss Irene!

IRENE

That's good, April. Let's get started or we'll still be out here when it gets dark, and no one wants that.

(APRIL looks around at the trees worriedly, as if something might jump out at any moment.)

The boys can lead, seeing as they're stronger and fitter. I'll stay in the middle. None of you young ladies are to pass me or lose sight of me. You'll be responsible, won't you Candace? Pay attention, Bronte.

(CANDY nods. IRENE looks pointedly at BRONTE, who sighs and slumps her shoulders in defeat. Her stereo begins to play some despondent music.)

BRONTE

Ugh, fine.

IRENE

(Walking at a brisk pace)

Stick to the path. Shoulders back, remember, strong shoulders show strong spirit.

(IRENE begins chanting as she makes her way ahead and EXITS off stage.)

2, 4, 6, 8 New Dawns Camp is really great...

BRONTE

Come on! I'll race you to the next corner...

(BRONTE's stereo plays upbeat challenge music loudly, like you would find on a high-stakes game show.)

APRIL

We're not supposed to split up. Can you turn that music off, Bronte? We don't need your soundtrack playing the whole hike.

CANDY

That's what she's carrying. You know we're not supposed to tell people to hide their items.

BRONTE

(pointing at APRIL.)

She knows all about hiding items. She's still carrying hers in its box. She doesn't even know what's inside. Why haven't you opened yours, April?

(BRONTE reaches for APRIL's box. BRONTE's stereo plays anticipatory music.)

APRIL

Get away! Don't you dare try and open it!

BRONTE

But you're *supposed* to open it. We all got boxes like this. If I hadn't opened mine when it showed up on my tenth birthday, I wouldn't have found my cool stereo. A stereo is cooler than a box. Don't you want to know what's inside?

APRIL

What if it's something bad, or embarrassing...I'll have to carry it forever.

BRONTE

But you're carr-

CANDY

(interrupting)

-Bronte. She's allowed to take her time to open her item, don't pressure people.

BRONTE

That's easy for you to say. You're carrying gumballs. Can I have one?

CANDY

No, these are mine. I need them.

BRONTE

April looks stupid with that box in front of her face. You can't tell what she's thinking.

CANDY

Not like you, we can always tell what you're thinking.

APRIL

Come on you guys, Miss Steele's gone around the corner. We're not supposed to lose sight of her!

(BRONTE's stereo plays plodding, drudgery music as she begins to trudge reluctantly along the path.)

BRONTE

I'm tired. If you gave me one of your gumballs, I'd have more energy.

APRIL

What are you, a two-year-old? She said you couldn't have one. You should have packed your own. I packed everything! Where was your checklist?

BRONTE

I didn't use the checklist. Irene said to pack so much stuff, but we're not going to need it.

(They turn the corner and find a fork in the path that goes three different ways.)

CANDY

Oh no, three paths...

APRIL

Which way did she go?

BRONTE

I need to get back to camp to get new stereo batteries. It must be this way!

(BRONTE runs ahead down the first path. Her stereo plays high suspense chase music. The first path leads her up a steep track which opens to a cliff lookout. CANDY and APRIL run after her, but APRIL is hindered by the large box she is carrying. CANDY slows herself to keep pace with APRIL.)

CANDY

Bronte, wait!

APRIL

We're not allowed to split up, remember!

(APRIL and CANDY reach BRONTE who has come to a stop at the edge of the cliff. They are all out of breath and put their things down to rest a moment.)

CANDY

This track goes the wrong way! I was trying to tell you, but you ran off.

BRONTE

I want to get back to camp, my stereo batteries are low.

(BRONTE's stereo plays a whining instrumental.)

APRIL

You should have been more prepared. I packed extra batteries, but I'm using them in my torch.

BRONTE

Why do you always have to be so prepared? What would happen if you didn't have that magical bag of yours?

(BRONTE swipes APRIL's bag. BRONTE's stereo starts to play taunting villain music.)

APRIL

Bronte! That's mine, give it back!

(BRONTE dodges APRIL's attempts to grab the bag back, darting towards the cliff edge. She stops and dangles APRIL's bag over the edge.)

CANDY

Stop it!

(APRIL rushes towards BRONTE, reaching out for her bag, but because she cannot see past her box, she accidentally knocks BRONTE's arm and she drops the bag over the cliff edge.)

APRIL

No! My bag!

CANDY

Why would you do that?

BRONTE

It wasn't me! She knocked it out of my hands, 'cause she can't see anything with that stupid box in front of her face!

(BRONTE's stereo starts playing loud, defiant punk-rock music.)

APRIL

All my stuff was in there... What are we going to do now? We're lost and now we've got nothing!

(APRIL slumps, CANDY goes over to APRIL and begins to comfort her as APRIL begins to hyperventilate.)

CANDY

It's going to be okay, April. You're having a panic attack.

BRONTE

Why didn't you just put your box down? It was a joke, can't you take a joke?

APRIL

What happens if... if we can't get back? What if it gets... dark? How will we find our way? What if...

CANDY

Bronte, come and hold these.

(CANDY empties her Gumballs into Bronte's hands, then hands the empty bag to APRIL.)

Breathe into this April. Take a four-count breath in, and six-count breath out. Focus on slowing down your breathing.

(APRIL takes the bag and begins breathing into it. Her breathing gradually calms. BRONTE surreptitiously eats some of the sweets, behind CANDY's back but in view of the audience.)

Do it six times with the bag, and then six times without. Then look for three things you can see, three things you can hear and three things you can feel.

APRIL

(Whispering in a small voice, getting more confident)

Tree, cliff, track. Birds, cicadas, wind through leaves. I can feel... the dirt on my hands, the wind on my face, the sweat on my back.

(APRIL begins to calm down)

Thanks, Candy. I didn't mean to get upset. It's just, I *need* to be prepared. I don't know what's going to happen now and that's scary.

CANDY

Don't be sorry. Anyone would get upset if their stuff got thrown off a cliff, I know I would. Sugar usually helps after a panic attack; would you like one of my gumballs? Bronte, can I have them back?

(BRONTE gives CANDY a handful of gumballs.)

I'm sure I handed you more than two. Where did the rest of them go?

BRONTE

(Trying to speak normally with a wad of gum in her mouth.)

I dunno.

CANDY

(Angrily)

Bronte?! I needed those. You don't understand...

BRONTE

You can have it back if you want.

(BRONTE takes the gum out of her mouth and dangles it in front of CANDY.)

CANDY

Oh, never mind. Here, April. You have this.

(CANDY gives APRIL one of the gumballs and starts chewing one herself. BRONTE puts her gum back in her mouth.)

We'd just better find our way back soon. We'll retrace our steps; everything will be fine. Do you want to try getting up, April, or do you need another minute?

APRIL

I think I'm okay now.

(APRIL starts to get up slowly.)

BRONTE

You should just open your box. There might be something in there that could help us.

(APRIL grips her box tighter, CANDY steps between them and BRONTE backs off.)

Come on then! Last one to the fork is a rotten egg!

(CANDY rolls her eyes as BRONTE runs ahead. CANDY and APRIL follow her back at a slower pace along the path. BRONTE's stereo plays racing music, then turns to idle game-menu music when she reaches the junction. CANDY and APRIL reach the same three paths. BRONTE is there waiting for them.)

CANDY

Does this look like the same junction to you?

BRONTE

Nah, we went further along. See you at the next cooorrnneer.

(BRONTE trails off as she sprints down the middle path that leads offstage and EXITS. APRIL and CANDY sigh and follow her at a slower pace. Once APRIL and CANDY have EXITED, BRONTE ENTERS from the side of the stage. She waits for CANDY and APRIL at the three paths, playing bored plodding music on her stereo. APRIL and CANDY ENTER and make their way over.)

CANDY

This is the same junction. I recognize that tree.

BRONTE

It's a different one. Hurry up, I want to get back to camp and change my stereo batteries.

APRIL

If you didn't have your music so loud, it wouldn't drain the batteries so much.

BRONTE

What would you know? You could have batteries in that box, but you won't open it.

CANDY

Bronte...

BRONTE

See you at the next corner!

APRIL

Wait up, Bronte!

(BRONTE sprints down the middle path that leads offstage and EXITS. APRIL and CANDY sigh and once again follow her at a slower pace. Once APRIL and CANDY have EXITED, BRONTE ENTERS from the side of the stage. She waits for the others at the three paths, playing bored plodding music on her stereo. CANDY and APRIL ENTER and make their way over, but she starts down the middle path again.)

BRONTE

Boo!

(CANDY and APRIL jump. CANDY swallows her gum.)

CANDY

Bronte!

BRONTE

Middle path is always the right way! See you at the next coooorrrnneeer!

CANDY

Not again.

(BRONTE sprints down the middle path that leads offstage and EXITS. CANDY starts to follow her but APRIL stops her.)

APRIL

Wait, I have a feeling...

(APRIL goes over to a tree next to the middle path, brushes off some moss and reveals a sign that says 'Loop Track.' BRONTE ENTERS from the side of the stage, out of breath. She is confused to see CANDY and APRIL already waiting for her at the junction.)

BRONTE

What?! But we've tried all the paths! I need my batteries...

APRIL

What about this way?

(APRIL gestures to the path on the right.)

CANDY

You two go ahead. I just have to check something, I'll catch up.

APRIL

You sure you don't want us to wait?

BRONTE

Waiting's for losers!

(BRONTE sprints off down the path on the right and EXITS.)

CANDY

Make sure she doesn't get too far ahead.

(APRIL nods, then follows BRONTE and EXITS. CANDY waits a moment, then takes a blood glucose meter out of her bag and a lancing device along with lancet. She inserts the lancet into the device, pricks her finger, squeezes a couple of drops of blood out which she presses onto a test strip and then inserts into the blood glucose meter. She looks at the reading. Her face falls and she worriedly hurries after the others, beginning to struggle with the weight of her pack. As soon as CANDY EXITS, BRONTE and APRIL RE-ENTER, followed soon after by CANDY. APRIL sees CANDY struggling and goes over to her.)

APRIL

She's just catching up, there she is. Candy, are you okay? You don't look so good.

CANDY

(angrily)

I'm fine.

(CANDY stumbles and almost trips.)

APRIL

You don't look fine.

BRONTE

This might be the only time I agree with April.

CANDY

I didn't want to worry you.

APRIL

Worry us with what?

CANDY

I swallowed my bubblegum.

BRONTE

Why's that a big deal?

CANDY

I'm a type one diabetic. If I don't eat for too long or do lots of exercise, I get hypoglycemia.

BRONTE

Hypo-what?

CANDY

Hypoglycemia. It's like a sugar crash. I can get weak, or pass out, or go into a coma...

(APRIL gasps audibly.)

BRONTE

What?!?!? A coma???

APRIL

So that's why your item is gumballs.

BRONTE

I'm sorry I took your gumballs, Candy.

CANDY

Just hurry up. We've got to get back to camp.

(CANDY, BRONTE and APRIL reach the same junction with three paths. CANDY trips and falls properly this time. She manages to shuffle herself to sitting position but does not stand. The others flock around her.)

APRIL

Are you okay?

CANDY

I don't think I can keep going. I just, I feel so weak.

BRONTE

But we have to.

APRIL

We're not leaving you behind.

BRONTE

My brothers would say, take a concrete pill and harden up.

APRIL

Don't say that Bronte.

BRONTE

You need to harden up too, April. You're the only one here that doesn't know what their item is.

APRIL

Stop pushing me. We don't even know if it's going to help or not.

BRONTE

You won't know until you find out. Your item is usually good though.

CANDY

Bronte's right. When I got my gumball machine, it meant I didn't have to worry so much about being diabetic. It dispenses three every hour to keep my sugar levels up.

BRONTE

My brothers are so loud, no one would hear me if I didn't have my stereo.

APRIL

But what if I can't figure out what it's for?

BRONTE

We'll help.

CANDY

It'll be okay, April.

APRIL

Okay.

(APRIL opens her box and takes a small item out in her hands. Lights raise on the item and then lower as reverent music plays. APRIL holds the item out for the others to see.)

BRONTE

What is it?

APRIL

It's a compass.

BRONTE

But it's pointing towards the sun. Doesn't the sun rise in the east and set in the west? Compasses are supposed to point north.

APRIL

(sadly, shaking it)

It's broken.

(APRIL slumps dejectedly, close to tears.)

CANDY

I don't think it is...

APRIL

What? Why?

CANDY

Because our items are always what we need, we just have to figure out how to use them.

APRIL

Why do I need a broken compass?

CANDY

I think it'll lead you back to camp.

APRIL

Just me?

CANDY

Bronte's going to stay and keep me company, aren't you Bronte?

BRONTE

Fine, but you'd better bring me back some batteries.

CANDY

My gumball machine is next to my bed.

APRIL

Okay. See you soon.

BRONTE

Bye April.

CANDY

Please hurry.

(APRIL follows her compass, it leads her down a new path that leads offstage. APRIL EXITS. BRONTE's stereo begins playing tense music that emphasizes her nervousness.)

CANDY

Bronte, could you turn that off please? I'm getting a headache and that's not helping.

BRONTE

I can't turn it off.

CANDY

Then can you at least play something calming?

BRONTE

I don't *feel* calm.

CANDY

Neither do I, but if I heard some calming music, I might. Have you ever tried changing the channel?

BRONTE

No, my stereo just plays whatever I'm feeling.

CANDY

But have you *tried* it? Playing music that makes you feel how you want to feel instead of how you're actually feeling?

BRONTE

No.

CANDY

I think if we had something calming to listen to, it might help us both.

(BRONTE begins fiddling with a dial on her stereo. It tunes out to radio static, skips past a few channels then settles on a peaceful chilled-out tune. BRONTE taps her foot impatiently, her nerves still showing as tension in her body, but as the song plays it slowly melts away. They sit for a few moments, just listening.)

See? That's really nice.

BRONTE

I guess.

CANDY

I feel so relaxed I could almost go to sleep.

BRONTE

No, Candy! You're not supposed to go to sleep.

(BRONTE's stereo begins playing horror music as she panics. CANDY startles back awake at the change in music and begins slurring her words and is sleepy.)

CANDY

I wasn't a sheep.

BRONTE

Candy, what are you talking about?

CANDY

I'm wide a steak.

BRONTE

You're not making any sense, Candy.

CANDY

I'm aching pearl effect dense.

BRONTE

Hurry up, April.

(APRIL ENTERS and looks around for BRONTE and CANDY.)

BRONTE

Over here! She's not making sense. I kept her awake, but I don't know what else to do.

APRIL

Out of my way.

(APRIL pushes through to CANDY, quickly giving her a gumball. CANDY slowly begins chewing.)

Where's her blood glucose meter? Pass me her bag.

(BRONTE passes CANDY's bag to APRIL, who takes out CANDY's blood glucose meter and testing equipment. She pricks CANDY's finger and administers the test, letting out a sigh of relief when she sees the reading.)

BRONTE

Is she going to be okay?

APRIL

I got here just in time.

BRONTE

You did it April!

APRIL

I can't believe it. My compass led me straight to April's gumball machine, and then straight back here. I didn't see Miss Steele, so we might not get in trouble. Are you feeling any better, Candy?

CANDY

I'm starting to.

(CANDY slowly gets to her feet, APRIL swoops in to support her.)

BRONTE

Good. If you're feeling better, we should get back to camp. I still need batteries. See you at the next coooooorrneeeerr!

(BRONTE races off down the path and EXITS. CANDY sighs and rolls her eyes.)

CANDY

Here we go again.

(APRIL supports CANDY as they follow BRONTE back down the path and EXIT together.)

*The End.*

## Play II: Seeds and Rain

Seeds and Rain

A short play

By Jessica Ramage

## SUMMARY

Fleur, a clumsy but good-hearted girl who carries seeds that she can't seem to get to grow is nervous when she is put in a bunk room with Rain, a gothic girl who has a dark rain cloud that follows her around, plus the baking squad – Sue, the leader who carries eggs, Florence who is Sue's right-hand woman and carries flour, and Clara a follower and motherly type who carries milk. Fleur is from the city, and everyone else goes to the same school. When Irene the camp coordinator calls for lights out, the baking squad convene a meeting and Fleur overhears all the different plans that the baking squad have come up with to cause chaos on the camp – including switching the bunk-room assignments so they could all be in the same room and putting Rain on the top bunk. But Rain is a sleepwalker and real chaos ensues when she sleepwalks out of the top bunk, falls and then runs out into the night. Irene sends Fleur after her, but will Fleur be able to calm Rain down? Will they start to grow a friendship that blossoms into something beautiful like the flowers that grew overnight by the bench they talked on?

## CHARACTERS

FLEUR	A young girl, about 13, the item she carries is seeds, which periodically fall out of her clothes. She is clumsy but good-hearted.
RAIN	A young goth girl, about 13, who is always deadpan. The item she carries is a raincloud that follows her everywhere. Her hair is always wet, and she is convinced her rain is a burden to everyone around her.
SUE	A young girl, about 13. Friends with Florence and Clara, Sue is the leader. Many people feel like they are walking on eggshells around her. The item she carries is eggs.
FLORENCE	A young girl, about 13. Friends with Clara and Sue, Florence is a follower. She is right-hand woman to Sue and always likes things to be clean.

CLARA                      A young girl, about 13. Friends with Florence and Sue. Clara is a follower and is the mother of their friend group.

IRENE                      A woman in her fifties, camp coordinator for the leadership camp. The item she carries is steel.

### SETTING

A leadership camp for young people.

### TIME

Spring, the holidays after middle school has finished. A parallel universe where everyone can see the things (pressures/ worries/ influences) they carry around with them, which take the form of large cumbersome items unique to each person.

### PRODUCTION NOTES

These are simply suggestions, so the production team doesn't feel overwhelmed by the absurd prop aspects, feel free to ignore.

Rain's clouds can be created using Dacron (pillow stuffing) with string lights (fairy lights) in them to simulate the lightning flash, and this can be incorporated into her costume so that her clouds move with her. Her rain can be created by hiding a hand-held pressure sprayer or other such hose in Rain's bunk, which she can control out of sight of the audience.

The Baking Squad will have their own ways of carrying their items, Sue may have little knitted egg pouches that she wears around her neck (as they are fragile and she needs to take extra care of them). Clara might have a refrigerated/insulated bag she carries her milk in, and Florence may carry her flour bags like a baby (this used to be part of the childhood education program at school called 'flour babies' where students would have to take care of flour bags as if they were newborns. There is a popular YA fiction novel by Anne Fine called 'Flour Babies' which may be a good reference.

## SCENE I

(A dormitory, three bunk beds and two desks, two sets of drawers and a window. There are sleeping bags on each of the bunks and open luggage bags at the foot of each bed. RAIN ENTERS dressed in pajamas and carrying her toothbrush. She puts it away in her bag, takes out a pair of headphones and climbs to the top bunk. She puts them on, then snuggles into her sleeping bag. Her raincloud drips slowly onto the bunk beneath her. FLEUR ENTERS also dressed in pajamas, holding a toiletries bag. She thinks the room is empty. She goes to her bag, puts away her toiletries and takes out a box, silently praying that the contents are intact. She opens it and then takes out a very tiny, very wilted seedling which she spritzes with a mister from her bag, and then places reverently on the windowsill. RAIN takes note but doesn't say anything. FLEUR closes the curtains to hide the plant, then quickly goes back to her bag as the sound of girls chatting gets louder. SUE, FLORENCE and CLARA ENTER mid-conversation.)

FLORENCE

That lasagna tasted like my back feels after the gym...sweaty. I'd give it a two out of ten.

SUE

I can't believe you ate three plates of the stuff!

CLARA

I swear that camp coordinator, Irene whatever, was waiting for all our plates to be empty before she said we could go. *Someone* had to eat it.

SUE

I'm surprised you're keeping it down; I would've lost it by now.

CLARA

Don't say that, Sue, you know I have a weak stomach.

SUE

Oh quit your mooing, Clara. Florence, help me with my mattress. We're going to sleep on the floor tonight, it's more communal...and that way we can chat.

FLORENCE

That's a great idea! Bunkbeds are so outdated, do they think we're little kids?

CLARA

I don't think I've slept in a bunk since I was in primary.

(FLORENCE and SUE begin hauling the mattress underneath RAIN off the bunk and onto the floor, FLEUR watches.)

SUE

(Notices FLEUR and catches her eye.)

What are you looking at?

FLEUR

Nothing.

(FLORENCE and SUE start to flip the mattress, but as they do, all the water from RAIN's cloud tips onto them both.)

SUE

Ugh! Yuck! it's all wet! Florence, get me your towel.

(FLORENCE goes to get her towel. SUE hits the bunk frame in frustration and another shower of rain falls from the bunk above, soaking her. She squeals and starts to shake off the water.)

Eeeew! Why's everything soaked?

(RAIN emerges from her sleeping bag and pokes her head over the top of the bunk at the commotion. Florence begins drying the mattress.)

RAIN

(To SUE)

Hey, would you quit it?

SUE

(glaring up at RAIN)

I didn't know *you* were going to be in our room, Rain. I thought they'd put you in a cabin on your own.

RAIN

I wish! Just my luck that I'm in a room with the most talkative clique in school, though I shouldn't have expected any different. They assigned me a top bunk, even though I said that I sleepwalk on my form.

SUE

You better hope my mattress dries out. If my hair's frizzy in the morning, there'll be hell to pay!

RAIN

At least you're not sharing your bunk with spiders.

FLORENCE

(whipping her head around in fear)

Spiders?

RAIN

Yeah, I started naming them. That one's Bunky, that one's Punky and that guy's Funky, 'cause he's caught the most flies. I was gonna name them all, but I lost track of who's who...

SUE

If you're trying to say you want to sleep on the floor with us, there's no room.

FLEUR

But there's a spare mattress...

SUE

I like to stretch out; there's no room.

RAIN

I'll take my chances up here. I actually like my sleep and there's no way I'll get any down there with you guys yabbering away in my ear all night.

(To FLEUR)

These guys go to my school. I hope you brought headphones; they talk a *lot*.

FLEUR

Thanks for the heads up.

SUE

Whatever. I'm surprised you're in a bunk. I thought you'd sleep hanging from the roof like a bat.

RAIN

(deadpan)

I would've brought my coffin, but it wouldn't fit in my luggage.

(RAIN puts her headphones back on and snuggles back into the far corner of her bunk.)

SUE

(to FLEUR)

So what's your name, new girl?

FLEUR

Fleur.

FLORENCE

That's pretty.

SUE

Shut up, Florence. I'm Sue, that's obviously Florence and that's Clara over there. We're called the baking squad, 'cause I've got to carry eggs, Florence carries flour and Clara carries milk.

CLARA

We've been BFFs since primary.

FLORENCE

There's another girl that carries baking-soda, she makes the best cookies, but Sue said we shouldn't invite her.

SUE

Shut up, Florence! So, what've you got to carry? I thought you'd have heaps of flowers, Fleur is French for flower isn't it?

FLEUR

(Flicks her sleeve and shower of seeds falls out.)

I'm stuck with seeds, but they never grow into anything...

CLARA

Where are you from, anyway?

FLEUR

I'm from the city.

(gesturing to RAIN)

What's her name?

SUE

That dark cloud hanging out on that bunk? That's Rain. We don't really talk to her if we can help it.

FLORENCE

Yeah, Rain is like a two out of ten when it comes to conversation. She's always sad about something.

CLARA

What's the city like?

FLEUR

I dunno, it's really big and everything's far apart. The buildings in the centre make me feel small.

CLARA

The tallest building we have in our town is the insurance building. I think it's ten stories.

FLEUR

You can't see the top of the skyscrapers in my city. They're so big they make the sky feel far away.

SUE

There's no room on the floor for you, Fleur, but you can move your mattress down to the bottom bunk if you want to.

FLEUR

I'm okay, I've already set all my things up.

FORENCE

Aw, come on! Tell us more stories about the city!

FLEUR

Maybe tomorrow, I'm pretty tired.

SUE

Come on Florence, Clara. Fleur thinks she's too cool to talk to us.

FLEUR

But I'm not-

(The girls are interrupted by three sharp knocks at the door. They all turn to look as IRENE ENTERS.)

IRENE

(addressing the girls)

Good evening young women. I see you've all settled in. I'm just making sure you all made it back from dinner.

(She begins counting the girls. She doesn't see RAIN.)

One...two...three...four. Shouldn't there be five of you?

SUE

I *wish* there were only four of us...

FLEUR

(Pointing to RAIN's bunk)

Rain's asleep already.

IRENE

Oh, I see. Poor little blighter, tuckered out already. Well, it's time for lights out, I hope you all won't be too far behind her. My staff quarters are on the other side of this wall...

(She taps the wall.)

...And I will not be happy if I have to come back and tell you all to be quiet. Do you understand?

FLEUR, SUE, CLARA AND FLORENCE

(in unison.)

Yes Miss Irene.

IRENE

You've got ten seconds to get into your sleeping bags, then I'm turning off this light.

(She pauses while the girls scramble into their sleeping bags. They all take their torches and settle.)

Goodnight, Room Eight. See you in the morning.

(IRENE turns out the light and then EXITS. The room is pitch black. The sound of her footsteps receding can be heard. Several beats.)

FLORENCE

(whispering)

Do you think she's gone yet?

CLARA

(whispering angrily)

No! Shhh! She's gonna hear you and come back.

(FLORENCE begins fake-snoring loudly.)

SUE

Quit it, both of you. She's obviously gone, or she would've told you two idiots to shut up by now!

(Flashing her torch at the ceiling.)

Has everyone got their torches?

(SUE and FLORENCE take out their torches and turn them on. SUE shines hers in CLARA's face, she recoils. They all hold their torches under their chins and shuffle in their sleeping bags so they're in a circle.)

Right, let's get into our first order of business...

FLORENCE

You make it sound like a business meeting.

SUE

It *is* a business meeting, Florence. We're getting doooown to business.

(FLORENCE and SUE giggle. Sue clears her throat.)

First topic, how do we get out of the scheduled activities tomorrow?

CLARA

Ugh, you're right. I don't feel like going on another muddy hike, or sitting around in a circle crying about my feelings.

FLORENCE

We'll just leave, they won't miss us.

CLARA

We can't do that. We have to come up with a plan. Come on, Sue. You were the one that got us all in the same bunkroom.

SUE

It was easy. They write the room assignments on whiteboards. I just snuck out during the introductions and made some changes. I should have looked at who *else* was in the room though.

(SUE glares at RAIN's bunk. RAIN starts to cry quietly. FLEUR notices and sits up in her bunk, but the girls on the floor stay oblivious.)

CLARA

Can we take our names off the roll somehow? Then they won't call out for us.

FLORENCE

How about we leave just after roll call?

SUE

Good idea, Florence. On the hike tomorrow, we'll stay for the hellos and then linger behind and make our way back to camp. They'll never know, cause it's a loop track.

CLARA

They'll just think we're really fast walkers.

SUE

Now! Second order of business, I call dibs on Brian from the boys' group. You all remember I saw him first!

FLORENCE

He's not the type you usually go for Sue. I saw him playing piano after dinner.

SUE

I think it's dreamy. Maybe he'll write me a song.

CLARA

But he's so nice and you're-

SUE

-I'm what? Why can't I like a nice boy?

(CLARA and FLORENCE laugh nervously. RAIN cries softly, FLEUR leans out of her bunk to check on her. Sound of footsteps approaching. SUE elbows CLARA who elbows her back, then hears the footsteps and elbows FLORENCE. They all turn off their torches and pretend to be asleep.)

FLEUR

(To RAIN.)

Are you okay?

(RAIN cries harder, her raincloud showering the bunk below. FLEUR finds her torch in her bunk and shines it at RAIN'S bunk, the exact moment that IRENE ENTERS.)

IRENE

(Furious, but trying to keep quiet.)

Torches after lights out?! You there...

(IRENE points to FLEUR.)

...hand me your torch immediately!

FLEUR

(Earnestly)

But I was just trying to check on the girl in that bunk... she's crying.

(IRENE inspects RAIN's bunk. RAIN has stopped crying and is now pretending to sleep.)

IRENE

(taking FLEUR's torch)

Well, she's fine now. Just go to sleep! Now, who else had torches? I heard more than one voice in here...

(SUE lets out a giggle, FLORENCE snorts trying to hold in her laughter. CLARA rolls over in her fake sleep and accidentally flicks her torch on in her sleeping bag. IRENE sighs.)

Alright, you three on the floor. I know you're not asleep. Torches, now.

(SUE, FLORENCE and CLARA all sit up and reluctantly pass their torches to IRENE.)

If I hear another peep out of any of you, your entire bunk room will be on dishes and toilet cleaning duty for the rest of the camp!

(IRENE EXITS. Several beats. Everyone is shaken up by the reprimand.)

CLARA

(whispering)

Are you guys awake?

SUE

Shut up, Clara!

FLORENCE

Yeah, go to sleep, Clara, I don't want to risk cleaning toilets!

(Everyone but FLEUR shuffles and eventually falls asleep. FLORENCE snores loudly, CLARA sleeps with a pillow on top of her head to block out the snoring. SUE sleeps diagonally across two mattresses, her eggs in a blanket nest beside her. FLEUR gets out of bed and goes to the window to check her seedling. She opens the curtain just a bit and the moonlight reveals that her seedling is even more wilted than before. Her face falls in disappointment. RAIN tosses and turns, having a bad dream. RAIN whimpers and FLEUR looks over in the moonlight as RAIN sits up in a sleepwalking state and turns to get out of bed. FLEUR reaches out and tries to stop the accident happening, but she is too far away. FLEUR lets out a silent scream as RAIN falls onto the mattress next to SUE, causing a loud thump that wakes everyone up.)

CLARA

What was that?

(FLEUR turns on the light.)

SUE

Euch! Rain's in my bed!

FLORENCE

Did she fall off the bunk?

(RAIN comes to, looks around mortified and then runs out of the room, EXITING as IRENE ENTERS).

IRENE

(hissing menacingly)

It is the middle of the night! What on earth makes you think you can make this amount of noise? Where was she going?

(She looks around at the girls, who are all confused or shaken up.)

Can someone tell me what is going on?

FLEUR

Rain was sleepwalking. She fell.

SUE

(noticing that one of her eggs has broken)

My eggs?! Oh my god. She's going to pay for this!

FLORENCE

Yeah! We'll make her pay.

CLARA

I'm sure she didn't mean to.

IRENE

No one is doing anything until we've all had our eight hours of rest. I'll decide what happens next. You there, tell me exactly what happened.

(IRENE points to FLEUR.)

FLEUR

(pointing at SUE, FLORENCE and CLARA)

They changed the bunk allocations around so they'd all be in the same bunk room! Rain sleepwalks and they put her on the top bunk. I saw her get up and try to get out of bed like she was at home. She dropped like a stone.

IRENE

Rain's the girl that ran out?

FLEUR

Yes.

IRENE

Go after her. We can't have her wandering around out there by herself. If you find her, bring her straight back here and go to bed, you hear me? I'll check by the lake, the water's almost invisible at night. As for you three....

(IRENE points to SUE, FLORENCE and CLARA.)

...You will all be sleeping in opposite corners of the main hall. I will not have students going behind my back on this camp. You have ten seconds to get your things together...Do you hear me? (*beat of stunned silence*) Do you hear me?

(EVERYONE nods. FLEUR EXITS. IRENE leads SUE, FLORENCE and CLARA out with their extra sweatshirts and blankets and they EXIT together.)

## SCENE II

(Outside. FLEUR searches for RAIN. The sounds of a storm brewing can be heard. RAIN sits on a bench out of sight of FLEUR, crying.)

FLEUR

Rain! Where are you?

(Thunder rolls, then lightning cracks and RAIN's cloud lights up, revealing her location.)

Rain! Are you okay? Rain?

RAIN

Go away.

FLEUR

I just want to help.

RAIN

You're just going to make fun of me like the others.

(RAIN's cloud's light up again, illuminating the stage for a brief moment. FLEUR makes her way towards RAIN.)

FLEUR

I won't, I promise.

RAIN

You're just like them, keeping secrets.

(RAIN's cloud's light up. FLEUR gets closer)

FLEUR

What do you mean?

RAIN

Tell me why you keep a pot-plant on the window that you don't want anyone to see, and I'll tell you why I was crying.

FLEUR

...You saw that?

(FLEUR REACHES the bench and sits, catching her breath.)

RAIN

I keep to myself most of the time, it's easier. Anyway, I guess it means I fade into the background. People don't notice me, but I notice everything.

FLEUR

Why *do* you keep to yourself?

RAIN

Isn't it obvious? I have a massive raincloud that follows me around everywhere. Most people don't want me to rain on their parade. Anyway, you're avoiding the question.

FLEUR

(sighs)

You've got a raincloud, and I've got seeds that never grow.

(She throws her arms out, scattering seeds everywhere.)

That's what that pot-plant was. My best attempt to turn my seeds into something...anything... That was months of germinating and watering schedules and singing to it any chance I could. I kept it secret so no one would ask how it was doing... or worse, try to help. But then my parents made me come here, and I couldn't leave it behind, and there's no way I was going to let anyone else take care of it...

RAIN

Have you tried putting it outside?

FLEUR

Are you joking? There's frost and wind, not to mention bugs that would eat that whole seedling in one bite if they had the chance! No way! It's much better off in my bedroom window at home.

RAIN

I'm just saying, nature doesn't like to be controlled.

FLEUR

Well now that you've given your advice, that was not asked for by the way, why don't you tell me what happened in there? I know you were crying; I got my torch confiscated because of you. Was it something Clara, Sue and Florence said?

RAIN

Those girls talk too much for their words to mean anything... No... If I have to be honest ...it's my first night away from home, and... it's harder than I thought. I had a nightmare that the bus broke down and we got stuck here. I had to get away, and I was trying to get up but I was trapped and I looked down and it was all those ropes from the confidence course tying me down and the cabin was filling up with water. Then I woke up on the floor.

FLEUR

That's awful.

RAIN

The worst part was waking up next to Sue. Her startled face was the first thing I saw, and I just had to get out before she could make some snarky comment. I don't know how I'm going to go back in there...

FLEUR

It's okay, they're not there. I told Irene about them switching the bunks and she said they'd have to sleep in the main hall as punishment.

RAIN

Really?

FLEUR

Yeah, she sent me out to look for you. We're supposed to go back to bed straight away.

RAIN

Can't we just sit here for a bit?

FLEUR

Sure. I'll just say it took longer to find you.

(Several beats. RAIN's storm starts to calm.)

I know you think everyone hates your rain, but I find it really calming.

RAIN

Yeah? (*Beat while they listen to the rain.*) I never thought about it like that.

(They listen for a moment more, then RAIN stands up.)

FLEUR

Are you ready to go back in?

RAIN

Yeah. I think so.

FLEUR

Alright, come on.

(RAIN turns on her torch and leads FLEUR back down the path. They EXIT together.)

### SCENE III

(The cabin. FLEUR and RAIN are both asleep. The sound of girls approaching wakes them up. SUE bursts in and ENTERS, followed by FLORENCE and CLARA. They are chattering excitedly.)

SUE

I can't believe it! I swear they weren't there yesterday.

FLORENCE

They're so pretty!

CLARA

We must not have seen them.

FLEUR

Seen what?

FLORENCE

The flowers by the bench outside. There are all kinds of them!

CLARA

I'm sure they must have been there before.

FLORENCE

Nuh-uh. There was nothing there, I swear!

SUE

Hurry up, you two. I don't want to miss out on the good seats in the dining hall! You know Brian's going to be there and I want to do my hair first.

CLARA

Coming!

(SUE, CLARA and FLORENCE gather their toiletries and EXIT. FLEUR and RAIN look at each other from the top of the bunks.)

RAIN

Your seeds! They must've grown!

FLEUR

Your rain helped.

(RAIN and FLEUR both jump out of bed excitedly and race to look through the window.)

RAIN

There are so many flowers out there!

FLEUR

It's not just the bench, there are flowers along the whole path we walked.

RAIN

Wait, is that Brian? The one that plays piano?

FLEUR

Yeah, the one Sue liked. He's picking the flowers! He's got a whole bunch.

RAIN

Here comes that girl with the light, I think her name was Sunny.

FLEUR

Aaaw, he's giving her the flowers. Sue's going to be soooo jealous

RAIN

She's going to have egg on her face for sure.

(RAIN and FLEUR both laugh. They step back from the window.)

FLEUR

Come on, if we hurry, we can look at the flowers before breakfast.

(RAIN pauses and catches FLEUR's eye.)

RAIN

Hey, thanks for coming to find me last night, and for not making me go back straight away.

FLEUR

You needed some time alone... I did too. It was nice to do nothing, together.

RAIN

I hope I didn't rain on your parade.

FLEUR

I think sometimes, you need to have your parade rained on. It makes you appreciate everything that comes after. Come on, I'll race you to the bench!

RAIN

Alright, three, two, one, go!

(RAIN and FLEUR race excitedly offstage and  
EXIT.)

*The End.*

## Play III: Family Ties

Family Ties

A play in one act

By Jessica Ramage

## CHARACTERS

Irene Steele	A rusted older woman in her early 50s, mother to Reuben and wife to Tyson. She is the organizer of the camp. Traditional and archaic. The item she carries is steel.
Tyson Knotts	A stern older man in his late 50s, sailor type. Father to Reuben and husband to Irene. The item he carries is rope.
Reuben (Ruby) Knotts	A young boy, thirteen. Free spirit, lanky, slightly effeminate teenage son of Tyson and Irene. The item he carries is pink thread.
Sunny Goodman	A young girl, thirteen. Toxically positive and always appears to be in a good mood. She has a religious background and is a participant in the camp. The item she carries with her is radiant light.
Wiremu Harakeke	A young boy, thirteen. He is strong-willed, but respectful and is a participant in the camp. The item he carries is flax which grows from his back.
Aiden Jones	A young boy, thirteen, nerdy type. Participant in the camp. He carries his own unique item (the actor may decide what this is.)
Matt Scott	A young boy, thirteen, nerdy type. Participant in the camp. He carries his own unique item (the actor may decide what this is.)
Caleb Thomas	A young boy, thirteen, nerdy type. Participant in the camp. He carries his own unique item (the actor may decide what this is.)

Amelia Morrison	A young girl, thirteen, quite tough. Participant in the camp. She carries her own unique item (the actor may decide what this is.)
Blake Peck	A young girl, thirteen, quite tough. Participant in the camp. She carries her own unique item (the actor may decide what this is.)
Claire Williams	A young girl, thirteen, quite tough. Participant in the camp. She carries her own unique item (the actor may decide what this is.)

## SUMMARY

Reuben, the child of Irene and Tyson – the camp coordinators, has always wanted to take part in the camp, but not the parts that his parents want him to. The item he carries is pink thread, which is no good for tying knots like his father wants him to do; it's easier for his father to tie knots because he carries rope. His mother is overprotective and teaches him to hide his thread away, so he won't be bullied on the camp like he was at his last school. His parents don't get him, and though he initially tries to impress his dad and the other boys, he eventually rebels and is sent out to do laps. Instead, he sneaks into the girls' sewing class and befriends Sunny, an overly positive girl whose item is beaming light. Sunny is not very good at sewing, though she won't admit it, or admit anything that isn't looking on the bright side of things. They develop a friendship as Reuben works on a costume to wear in the talent show, but when Tyson realises Reuben is not out doing laps, he calls a game of cops and robbers to find Reuben and the camp falls into disarray. The camp-goers learn to use their talents to find Reuben and Irene is furious when she finds him, and furious with Sunny for hiding him. Will Sunny and Reuben find a way to work together when they are put in detention and banned from the talent show? Will Sunny and Reuben be able to pull something together in time? And if they do, how will the other camp goers and Reuben's parents react? Will they still force Reuben to hide his thread and go to an all-boys school? Or will Reuben and Sunny's support for each other be enough to give them the confidence to make others see the value in their items too?

## SETTING

A summer holiday youth camp called New Dawns Leadership Camp, a camp where young boys and girls can learn to become young men and women.

## TIME

School holidays. A parallel universe where people can see the things (pressures/ worries/ influences/ baggage) they carry around with them, which take the form of one large cumbersome item unique to each person.

## PRODUCTION NOTES

Please note that the gender binaries (namely the boys' and girls' camps) in this play are representative of the camp co-ordinators' views and will eventually be deconstructed by the end. This play is about characters learning to stay true to themselves within such environments while advocating for change.

Below are simply suggestions, so the production team doesn't feel overwhelmed by the absurd prop aspects, feel free to ignore.

Sunny's light can be created using a mixture of battery powered lights that the actor can carry (or that can be incorporated into their costume) and stage lights. If possible, there should be a follow-spot trained on Sunny whenever her light is 'on.'

The actor playing Tyson should have a knowledge of basic nautical knots (there are quite a few tutorials available on YouTube). He should be able to competently tie knots under pressure and pronounce the names correctly (a Bowline knot is a type of knot pronounced bow-lin). His rope can also be incorporated into his costume, as well as some nods to his nautical background, eg: a captains' hat or an anchor tattoo.

The actor playing Wiremu would ideally be able to sing and play guitar, though his song for the talent show is largely based on storytelling, so could be mostly spoken, and the guitar/ backing could be played by another cast member or pre-recorded and played as a backing track. The song is sung to the tune of the verse in Suzanne Vega's "The Queen and the soldier", which is a great example of a song that tells a story, though the chord progression for guitar can be simplified to (CAPO: 2) Am Am F F, C G C G, Am Am F F, C G C. This repeats for all verses. The last line repeats the final progression C G C. If the guitar player is more advanced, they may choose to replace the C chord with Cadd9, which gives the song a lighter feel. If the melody is too high, the Capo can be removed to transpose it down slightly.

The actor playing Sunny would ideally be vocally competent, and it would be even better if she could play the guitar too. The sheet music and guitar chords for her talent show song are included.

The supporting feminine actors would ideally be experienced in or willing to learn how to perform slam poetry. There are lots of videos on Youtube that give an idea of the passion and emphasis needed to perform a slam poem. They may also choose to add their own choreographed movements/ gestures to emphasize certain lines.

The cast may be expanded to include 3-5 more Male/ Female members each. They would not have speaking parts, though there is opportunity to expand the talent show with devised scenes to accommodate the extra cast members and give them a chance to be in the spotlight. This also allows for collaboration between different arts departments, as it has the potential to incorporate Kapa Haka groups, Dance groups, Choral groups, Bands, or other performance groups who may be seeking the opportunity to perform

Aiden, Ben, Caleb, Amelia, Blake and Claire would have items they carry that are unique to them. I have left these items unspecified so that the actors may choose items that resonate with how they interpret the character. If there is time within the process, it may benefit the cast members to discuss items that a character in the world of the play may carry and what that item could represent for them.

(Please note: Sheet music and chords are available for Wiremu's and Sunny's songs on request from the playwright.)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For information purposes, these musical items are appended to this thesis in Appendices B and C.

ACT I

SCENE 1

(Split stage. Early morning. The lights rise on one side, where TYSON and REUBEN are setting up for the camp's knot-tying class. There is a whiteboard behind them with various knot patterns and diagrams drawn out and chairs in stacks. The other side is dark, but desks with sewing machines can be seen set out in rows.)

TYSON

(dragging the whiteboard)

Come on boy, give me a hand. This camp isn't going to set itself up.

REUBEN

(going to help TYSON)

You and Mum should pay me a salary. Some people might call this child labour.

(REUBEN and TYSON lift the whiteboard to the centre of the courtyard. They continue setting up seats and laying out rope at each station as they converse.)

TYSON

You've got some cheek, boy. You don't know a thing about child labour.

REUBEN

Really? I'm a child and I'm doing unpaid labour.

(REUBEN waves a piece of rope at TYSON).

TYSON

When I was in the Navy, we saw plenty of child workers-

REUBEN

(interrupting)

-Not another one of your old Navy stories, Dad! You better not do this when the others are here-

TYSON

(interrupting)

-The nerve of you, boy! You'd get fifty push ups if you were a serviceman.

REUBEN

On second thought, I guess it's better if you get it out of your system now.

TYSON

If you'd seen the things I saw overseas, then you might appreciate your surroundings. Those kids were younger than you, working their fingers to the bone making rugs and fishing nets and ammunition.

REUBEN

Yeah, well, the closest I've ever been to being overseas is when you took me out fishing and I was in a boat (*beat*) over the sea.

TYSON

I remember that trip, you were seasick the whole time. You've got no stomach.

REUBEN

I wasn't seasick, Dad, it's just that as soon as I caught a fish, I wasn't expecting you to split it open and rip its guts out right in front of me.

TYSON

It's the chum, or *fish guts* as you call it, that attracts the other fish in the water. We would've come home empty handed if I hadn't gutted that fish. Can you imagine the look on your mother's face if we didn't bring anything home for dinner? It's our job to bring home the bounty, young man.

REUBEN

You could've at least let me get a picture of Fred before you minced him into a lump of gore. I was nine.

TYSON

You named it?! I need to teach you better. What are the other boys going to think if you start naming the rabbits on tomorrow's hunt?

(Mocking REUBEN)

"Stop boys, don't shoot that one! That's Peter rabbit!"

(TYSON cracks himself up)

REUBEN

Do you want help setting this up or not? 'Cause I'll leave.

TYSON

Tell you what, Son; you finish helping me set up and then I'll *let* you leave. If you were smart though, you'd stay. You need to start learning some of these knots so you can impress the other boys. You're the son of a Navy Captain, you should be top of the class.

REUBEN

I guess it would be good to practice before everyone else gets here.

(TYSON and REUBEN move the last of the chairs and then set themselves up to practice tying knots. TYSON picks up his rope and begins to divide it. REUBEN goes to pick up the other end of TYSON's rope but he yanks it away.)

TYSON

Go on son, use your own rope.

REUBEN

But Dad! You know Mum says I'm not allowed, and my thread's way thinner than your rope. It's not fair!

TYSON

We work with what we're given, son. Everyone has something to carry. Skinny rope for a skinny boy, huh, fitting.

(TYSON picks up both ends of his rope, REUBEN dejectedly struggles to find the end of his thread and keep up.)

Now what should I teach you first? Maybe I should start with the 'impossible' knot...

(TYSON picks up another piece of rope and begins tying an impossible knot)

REUBEN

Like I'm ever going to be able to tie an 'impossible' knot. Give me something easier to start with!

TYSON

Actually, it's just a double fisherman's knot, but it got nicknamed the impossible knot cause it's almost impossible to *untie*. That's why we stopped teaching it at camp, too much clean-up. If you want something easy, I'll show you the bowline knot. You should be able to keep up with that one, I use it all the time on the boat.

REUBEN

(finding the end of his thread)

Alright, how do I start?

TYSON

(picking up the ends of his rope)

You make a loop in the stand-in line, then you grab the bitter end. That's the end of the rope, you can find that, can't you? You drive me to the end of my rope all the time. Now, if you were a boy scout, I'd give you the rabbit story, "The rabbit comes up out of his burrow, goes around the tree, then gets scared and goes back down his hole," but you're too old for all that.

REUBEN

Dad, I'm thirteen.

TYSON

Really? You *are* getting old. Watch how I do it.

(TYSON pulls the end of the rope through, forming a perfect bowline knot. He admires it proudly.)

And that's how it's tied.

REUBEN

(struggling, getting tangled in his thread but trying to follow along)

So, you make a loop, put the end through, the rabbit goes around the tree and then back through the loop and then you pull it here...

(REUBEN pulls the end of the rope through, and the whole thing falls apart.)

I thought you said this knot was easy!

TYSON

(tying and untying bowline knots in his rope at double speed)

It's easy if you do it right.

(REUBEN glares out at TYSON from under his tangle of pink thread.)

REUBEN

Sure, Dad. It's *easy* once you get it. It's just not easy *to* get. Show me again? Just not so fast this time.

TYSON

(getting frustrated)

Back in my day, you'd get push-ups for making a superior repeat himself. You get shown once, then it's on you to learn it. I guess you do need the rabbit story after all.

(TYSON unties his rope and begins tying a bowline knot painfully slowly.)

First you make a loop in the main line, then the end is your rabbit and that loop is its burrow. That slow enough for ya? Slow story for a slow boy.

(REUBEN glares at TYSON but follows along silently.)

The rabbit comes up out of his burrow, goes around the tree, then gets scared and goes back down his hole.

(REUBEN and TYSON both pull the end of their thread through; TYSON'S rope forms a bowline knot. REUBEN'S thread falls apart. REUBEN throws down his thread and tries to get up from his tangle.)

REUBEN

What the heck, I did exactly the same as you! I'm not cut out for this.

TYSON

(exploding)

If you can't learn to tie basic knots, then you're no son of mine.

(IRENE ENTERS, catching the last of TYSON's outburst. Her movements are mechanical, and her clothing is made of metallic material. Her arms are piled high with sewing supplies, which she drops in shock when she sees REUBEN and TYSON. She approaches them angrily.)

IRENE

(Slow-burning anger)

Tyson! What is going on here? I thought I told you both to set up for the camp! Why is Reuben covered in thread? We're expecting the campers to arrive any minute! What would the parents say if they saw the mess you've made!?

(IRENE helps REUBEN free himself from his tangle of pink thread.)

TYSON

I'm giving the boy a head start learning the ropes.

IRENE

(Sharply)

You thought it would be a *good* idea for him to get his thread all tangled, right before everyone arrives? What if the others had seen?

TYSON

I'm sure he can handle a little roughhousing. Can't be worse than what we go through on the boats. Kids need to get the snot kicked out of them every once in a while. Builds character, right boy?

(REUBEN shoots TYSON a look of hurt betrayal.)

REUBEN

You wanted them to see me with my thread out? I haven't even started this camp and you're setting me up to fail.

(REUBEN storms over to the sewing basket.)

IRENE

The least you can do is let him make friends without showcasing the thing they bullied him for. You don't know how cruel kids can be, Tyson. You weren't there. You were always out on the boats. *I* was the one sitting in the principal's office. *I* was the one who did all the paperwork for him to move schools.

TYSON

I wish I didn't spend so much time on the boats, but someone has to make a living for this family. I wish I was here more, because if I was, I wouldn't have molly-coddled our son.

IRENE

Save it for the camp assembly, Tyson. You still need to finish setting up. And don't give Reuben any special treatment. We don't need him getting bullied again in our very own camp.

TYSON

But-

IRENE

(interrupting sternly)

Now!

(TYSON's shoulders sink as he goes to write more diagrams on his whiteboard. IRENE crosses to where REUBEN is picking through the sewing supply basket.)

IRENE

(to REUBEN)

I know you're growing up, Ruby, but even so, you should know not to get your thread out.

REUBEN

Dad wouldn't let me use rope. I told him you said I wasn't allowed. I hate it when you guys fight.

IRENE

Your father only hears me when I raise my voice. He's listened to fog horns on the boat his whole life so perhaps he only hears when someone bellows. Don't take it to heart. Why don't you help me, I know there's a spool in here somewhere.

(IRENE and REUBEN both begin picking through the sewing supply basket. REUBEN treats the sewing items like valuable objects. He finds a spool and begins winding his thread around it.)

REUBEN

I wish I didn't have to hide my thread.

IRENE

I know, love, but it's for your own good. Wind it nice and tight so it stays tucked away. Here, let me help. They'll be arriving soon. You can help me set up for the assembly.

REUBEN

Okay, Mum.

(IRENE helps REUBEN wind his thread around the spool, then she places the basket of sewing supplies on one of the sewing machine stations and they both EXIT together. As IRENE leaves, she switches off the lights.)

SCENE 2

(The lights rise on the sewing classroom. TYSON ENTERS, carrying a heavy podium with microphone. He places it centre stage as IRENE and REUBEN ENTER. IRENE crosses to the podium and taps the mic to be sure it's working, while REUBEN drops pillows on the floor in front of the front row of audience members. IRENE and TYSON stand behind the podium as SUNNY, WIREMU, AIDEN, MATT, CALEB, AMELIA, BLAKE and CLAIRE ENTER and sit on a cushion. REUBEN distributes the last cushion and sits too.)

AMELIA

(to WIREMU, gesturing to his flax)

Hey, can you move over? Some of us would like to see, and your weeds are blocking the view.

WIREMU

It's not weeds. It's called harakeke, or flax, and it's attached to me, it's what I've gotta carry.

(gesturing to SUNNY)

Everyone's got one, see look, that girl's got light.

CALEB

(gesturing to REUBEN)

Why doesn't he have one?

WIREMU

I dunno, he probably hasn't figured out what to do with it yet, so he's hiding it. Tryin'a fit in.

(IRENE approaches the microphone and clears her throat. AMELIA leans over.)

AMELIA

Shhhhh! It's starting.

IRENE

(Clearing her throat, professional)

Welcome to New Dawns leadership camp for boys and girls, where we teach you to become young men and women. I am Irene Steele, and this is Tyson Knotts. We are your Camp Coordinators. I will be taking the classes for girls...

TYSON

...And I will be taking the classes for boys.

IRENE

You boys are lucky, you've got a real Navy Sea captain teaching you the ropes. Girls, you'll be with me. Today we'll learn to thread the bobbin into the machine, and over the week you'll make something you can take home with you. Just think how impressed your dads and brothers will be when you can mend their shirts and darn their socks.

(She looks at TYSON, who is looking away)

And as a finale to the camp, there will be the annual Talent Show.

(SUNNY squeals excitedly, REUBEN lets out an excited 'yuss.')

Quiet. Anyone who breaks rules will not be allowed to participate. Bear that in mind.

TYSON

Now, I want all the boys to come and help unload the bus. That will be your first task.

(The boys groan)

None of that, or you'll be doing push-ups instead of learning to tie knots.

IRENE

You heard him, file out, boys. Girls follow me.

(TYSON, REUBEN, WIREMU AIDEN, MATT and CALEB EXIT. Lights raise downstage as IRENE leads SUNNY, CLAIRE, AMLEIA and BLAKE to the sewing room, where she gestures for them to each take a machine. SUNNY takes the station closest to centre stage, while AMELIA, BLAKE and CLAIRE shuffle their stations closer together on the other side.)

I'm just going to grab the bobbins. Back in a tick.

(IRENE EXITS)

AMELIA

So what're you guys in for?

BLAKE

Broke a window at school. My parents thought losing my summer to this camp was good punishment.

CLAIRE

I got catfished. I thought I was meeting a boy from a school a couple towns over, but it turned out to be some guy in his 30s. My parents sent me on this camp as a social media detox.

AMELIA

That's rough. It's my second time here. Last year we made oven-mitts. I don't know why my parents think camps like this'll straighten me out. They just introduce me to other like-minded ladies like you.

BLAKE

(Gesturing to SUNNY)

What's her deal? You seen her before?

AMELIA

Nah, she wasn't here last time.

CLAIRE

Why's she glowing like that?

BLAKE

(to SUNNY)

Hey new girl, what's your deal?

SUNNY

What do you mean?

AMELIA

What are you in for?

SUNNY

An education, I'm hoping. Aren't you guys? I'm Sunny by the way.

(AMELIA, BLAKE and CLAIRE all laugh)

AMELIA

I don't know what you think you're going to learn here, Sunny, this place is the dumps.

SUNNY

Well it looks like we'll be learning sewing. I'm 'sew' excited, get it?

(gestures to the sewing machines)

BLAKE

(Rolling her eyes)

Ugh, one of those.

SUNNY

I've always wanted to learn to sew, but my Mum said I was too clumsy. I tried knitting once and ended up poking a hole in my finger. You know what the Lord says, though, if you get hurt, just turn the other cheek.

CLAIRE

If we have to buddy up, I bags not going with her! I don't want to end up with a needle in my eye!

(AMELIA, BLAKE and CLAIRE hurry to do the bags gesture. IRENE ENTERS and they hurriedly stop doing the gesture.)

IRENE

Nobody wants that. Now that you've had a chance to get that tittering out of your system, we may begin. Take your bobbin and find the end of the thread...

(IRENE demonstrates how to thread a sewing machine. SUNNY follows along enthusiastically, the others less so. They continue learning to sew silently, SUNNY collecting more and more sewing injuries. The lights raise on the other side of the stage where REUBEN, WIREMU, AIDEN, MATT and CALEB are chatting in the knot tying classroom.)

AIDEN

I hope we learn to untie the knots too. My headset cable is so tangled, I haven't been able to use it for months!

MATT

I've got a Razer headset. It's wireless, so I don't have that problem.

AIDEN

Lucky! I've been borrowing my sister's headphones, but they keep falling out when I'm playing Sea of Thieves.

CALEB

No way, I thought I recognized your voice. Are you the guy that helped me get revenge on that ghost ship last night?

AIDEN

(In his best pirate voice)

Ahoy! Me Matey, it be Cap'n Infallible here. Ready to join ye on ye mission to overthrow the dastardly ship of skeletons.

MATT

Captain Infallible I've been watching your livestream!

CALEB

You were *livestreaming*?! You're supposed to put a two-minute delay so they can't screen-watch. No wonder we got plundered right after we nabbed the skeleton loot. We got stream-sniped!

(MATT looks away sheepishly. CALEB catches him.)

It was you!?

MATT

Well, it is in the name, Sea of *Thieves*.

WIREMU

Is that a game? What do you do?

AIDEN

It's a PC game I've been playing online with these guys. I had no idea I'd meet them on this camp.

WIREMU

What's it about?

AIDEN

You're a pirate and you've got a ship, and you sail the seas with other people in search of treasure.

CALEB

(gesturing to MATT)

Unless you're this guy. He waits 'til other people gather loot, then plunders it for himself!

MATT

Hey! Sea of *Thieves*, remember?

WIREMU

Kāore, I haven't played that game, but I've been out on a boat before. I helped my Uncle with the nets out on the moana.

REUBEN

I've been on a boat too. My Dad took me fishing when I was nine.

AIDEN

Lucky! I've never been on a boat.

MATT

My parents sent me here 'cause they think I spend too much time inside.

CALEB

Mine too. Always telling me to get off the computer and get some sun.

REUBEN

If I spend too long outside, I get hay fever.

WIREMU

I thought we'd be learning stuff outside, ae. I would'a stayed at school if I liked sitting in a stuffy old classroom.

REUBEN

At least at *school* we have a teacher. It's starting to feel a bit like Lord of the Flies in here!

(WIREMU, AIDEN, MATT and CALEB all laugh. TYSON ENTERS, catching the end of the joke. He is carrying a small box. He looks disappointed in REUBEN but instead of saying something, he brushes on with the class.)

TYSON

Settle down, boys. You're about to learn a skill that could save your life one day. Sorry to keep you waiting; got to do one last check with the bus driver, otherwise you can guarantee someone's bag will go back to base and they'll have no pyjamas. Now that that's all sorted, we can start learning the bowline knot. Now, this knot is most commonly used where?

(WIREMU raises his hand. TYSON looks pointedly at REUBEN, but he keeps his hand down. TYSON eventually points at WIREMU to answer.)

Yes?

WIREMU

You use it to tie a halyard to the head of a sail, or when you need to tie a jib sheet to a clew.

TYSON

Well that's some very specialist knowledge you've got there young man. I thought you'd just say it's used on a boat. For those of you who don't know what he just said, this knot is used to make a fixed loop in the end of a line, then you can use that line to fasten things. You can even use it to join two ropes together, or to rescue your buddy if he falls down a hole.

AIDEN

(raising his hand)

What's in the box?

TYSON

(opening the box)

These are golden knot pins.

(The boys ooh and aah as TYSON holds up several gold pins in the shape of different knots.)

MATT

They're like little trophies!

AIDEN

They're too small to be trophies.

WIREMU

Ahakoā he iti he pounamu, although it is small it is a treasure.

TYSON

My wife, Irene, made them. She makes all the needles for the sewing class with her steel, but I managed to get her to make something for you boys too. You have to earn them, though.

CALEB

How do you win them? Is there a quest?

TYSON

(demonstrating as he speaks.)

Your task is to tie the knot right, (*pause*) on your first try. I'll only show you once so watch carefully. You start by making a loop in the main line, and with your other hand, you take the bitter end and feed it through that loop, take it around the main line and then back through. Then you pull this here, and that's how it's tied.

(TYSON pulls the end of his rope, forming a perfect bowline knot.)

Now, pick up your rope and give it a try.

(WIREMU, REUBEN, AIDEN, MATT and CALEB all pick up their ropes. They move in unison, making loops in their ropes and feeding the end through.)

REUBEN

(muttering quietly to himself)

The rabbit comes up out of its hole, goes around the tree and then back through the loop...

(At the same time, WIREMU, REUBEN, AIDEN, MATT and CALEB all pull the end of their rope in canon. All their knots fall apart except for REUBEN's.)

AIDEN

What the heck?!

MATT

(Throwing his rope down)

It's a trick!

CALEB

(pointing to REUBEN)

Wait, he's got a perfect knot!

(REUBEN holds his knot up proudly as TYSON goes over to inspect it.)

MATT

He cheated! I heard him muttering about rabbits. He obviously looked up how to do the knot beforehand.

AIDEN

He shouldn't get the pin. It wasn't his first try.

REUBEN

That's the first time I've tied it right!

TYSON

(quietly to REUBEN)

What did I tell you boy? You're too old for stories.

(Louder to everyone)

I didn't say anything about a rabbit in my explanation, therefore he will be disqualified from earning the golden bowline knot pin.

(TYSON puts the golden bowline knot pin back into the box.)

REUBEN

But you can't do that! I just did what you said!

AIDEN

He looks ropable.

MATT

You could say he's at the end of his tether.

CALEB

(tying a basic knot near the end of his rope then holding it up mock-sadly.)

He thought he was going to win, but I'm a frayed knot.

AIDEN

He did not see that coming.

MATT

I'm sure he didn't mean to string you along.

TYSON

You'll get another chance, boys. This isn't the end of the *(pause)* line.

(EVERYONE except for REUBEN laughs at TYSON joining in)

We'll learn another knot soon, but first you've got to finish the task you started.

REUBEN

But I already tied the knot! Why do I have to do it again?

WIREMU

Oi, quit it. I wanna learn how to tie the knot.

TYSON

(Demonstrating and ignoring REUBEN's protests)

You take your rope like this and make a loop in the main line, and with your other hand, you take the bitter end...

(REUBEN slumps into his seat and looks uninterestedly off towards the girls' classroom. The other boys follow along with TYSON as he continues teaching them the bowline knot. On the other side of the stage, the girls are learning to hand sew a hem, though SUNNY is having trouble, not that she'd ever admit it.)

SUNNY

(accidentally stabbing herself with a needle)

OW!! Mother loving goodness, this is so hard! But I'm having *so* much fun. My Mum never let me near the sewing kit at home!

IRENE

I can see why. Could you please try to get the needle into the piece of *fabric* and not into yourself, Sunny? We're going to run out of band aids at this rate!

SUNNY

It's okay. I can just suck my finger and it stops throbbing after a while. The stitches on this seam are so pretty though, look!

(She holds up her fabric, which has a very wonky seam.)

They look like those marker lines on the middle of the road.

AMELIA

Maybe, if the guy was drunk when he painted them.

BLAKE

Or if it was a really windy country road.

CLAIRE

It's supposed to be straight like this, see?

(She holds up her fabric, which has a straight seam.)

SUNNY

I didn't know it had to be anything. I thought a seam was just when you sew the edge of two bits of fabric. It still joins the fabric together.

IRENE

Quit your babbling! Do you ever take a breath?

(Gesturing to SUNNY's fabric.)

What's that red splotch? Just there on the seam.

SUNNY

Just a bit of blood where my finger got in the way. I guess I can tell whoever I give this to that I put my actual blood, sweat, and tears into making it!

AMELIA

Eew!

BLAKE

Gross!

CLAIRE

No-one's going to want anything with your blood on it.

IRENE

You're quite right. Luckily, you won't be giving these garments away. I think it's time to reveal what this year's project will be. Last year it was oven-mitts, the year before we made the sweetest ruffled aprons for Mothers' Day. This year, you will be making something for the most important women in your lives, *(pause)* yourselves.

(The girls sewing room 'ooh' excitedly.)

You already know that every year we have a camp talent show. This year you will also be making your own costumes.

(AMELIA, BLAKE and CLAIRE let out an excited titter.)

Now that *most* of you have mastered the basics...

(She looks at SUNNY condescendingly.)

IRENE (Cont.)

...you may move on to the design of your garment. Sunny, I would recommend you try to perfect the art of moving your hand out of the way before you try anything above beginner level.

SUNNY

Okay Miss Steele, I swear I'm getting better though. That last seam only nicked the end of my finger, and if I dye the whole thing red at the end, it'll hide all the blood.

(IRENE sighs.)

IRENE

(Pointing to the corner of the room)

On second thought Sunny, why don't you go over there and work on making a scrunchie so you can practice sewing in a straight line. I'll be over here, teaching the girls who show some promise.

SUNNY

You trust me to sew over there, all by myself? Thank you! I'm never allowed to work on my own at home, my younger siblings always try and join in. I'm the oldest, you see? It'll be so nice to do my own thing for once.

IRENE

And it'll be nice for us to get a break from your constant... bubbiness.

AMELIA

She won't have anyone to talk to over there, our ears might finally get a rest.

SUNNY

(Moving her desk and talking to herself)

It's okay, I guess I'll just talk to myself. That's what I do at school, 'cause I only started in intermediate. I was home-schooled before that and I didn't know anyone when I got there, and no one knew me cause I'm the oldest. None of my brothers and sisters have gone to proper school yet. It seems like everyone already knew each other in my classes. That's why I eat my lunch by the oak tree and talk to myself. I do have a friend called Brian, though. He goes to the same church as me, but we don't talk much-

AMELIA

-I guess I spoke too soon.

IRENE

Come on girls, we're going to learn about patterns now. If you focus hard enough, you can tune anything out...

(On the boys' side of the stage, everyone except REUBEN is working hard tying their knots while TYSON patrols their desks and inspects their process.)

TYSON

(inspecting WIREMU's knot)

That's very good work. You're a natural.

WIREMU

Thanks, sir, I use my flax at home to weave. My whanau taught me. The knots we use are almost the same, but I practiced with my flax first 'cause it was easier.

(He shows Tyson a flax leaf he has tied into a bowline knot.)

TYSON

We all must learn to work with what we're given. I was given rope to carry, so I became an expert at tying knots. It's impressive to see someone so young and so eager to learn.

(He looks pointedly at REUBEN, who does not look up to meet his gaze.)

You other boys could learn a lot from (*pause*), what's your name boy?

WIREMU

Wiremu, sir.

TYSON

You could learn a lot from William here. He's -

WIREMU

- Excuse me, Sir?

TYSON

(annoyed)

I just gave you a compliment, William, and now you interrupt me?

WIREMU

No disrespect sir, I just wanted to say my name is Wiremu, not William. I know the English version, but I'm proud of my name. My family gave it to me.

TYSON

Right... Wiremu. I'll try and remember that.

(TYSON moves on to REUBEN's station where his rope remains un-knotted.)

And what do we have here? An un-tied rope?

REUBEN

I don't know what you want from me.

TYSON

Do I sense insubordination?

(Everyone turns to look at REUBEN.)

REUBEN

You praise everyone else. But when I do a good job, I get disqualified? I don't like boats, or tying knots, I'm only trying to learn because it's what *you* want me to do!

TYSON

If you can call that trying to learn.

(REUBEN stands up)

REUBEN

There you go again-

TYSON

(interrupting, warningly)

-Reuben, stop this-

REUBEN

-I'm not even good enough to learn. Well, guess what? I don't want to! Screw this!

(REUBEN pushes his desk over and his thread tumbles out. He looks at it mortified.)

TYSON

(Pointing to the door)

Out. You'll run laps of the field if you can't show this classroom the respect it deserves.

AIDEN

What's that fallen out of his jacket?

MATT

Looks like thread, and it's all pink!

CALEB

I thought it was weird he wasn't carrying anything.

(TYSON realizes he has pushed REUBEN to the edge. REUBEN looks at TYSON, completely betrayed.)

TYSON

(Pointing to the door)

Laps. Now.

REUBEN

Don't expect me to come back.

(TYSON opens his mouth to say something as REUBEN EXITS the knot-tying classroom but thinks better of it. REUBEN sneaks into the girls' classroom and hides behind a pile of fabric at SUNNY's station.)

TYSON

Come on boys, settle down. Back to work, the lot of you. Can anyone show me a *finished* bowline knot?

(TYSON begins inspecting each boy's station as they frantically try to impress him with their knots. Meanwhile, SUNNY has pins sticking out of every part of her body but is happily chatting to herself while she sews her scrunchie, much to the others' dismay.)

AMELIA

Do you think she'll ever stop?

BLAKE

We've already established she doesn't stop for breath.

CLAIRE

I wish she'd dim her light. It's reflecting off my needle and giving me a headache.

SUNNY

... And that's why Brian won't sit with me anymore, because he feels like I'm putting a spotlight on him. He said it's okay when we're performing in the church band together, but at school he wants to blend in. I can't see why, I've never blended in...

CLAIRE

She's got that right.

IRENE

Okay, so now you have your patterns cut out and pinned down, it's time to start sewing it together. Put your piece on the machine and gently feed it through so the pins stay on the outside...Sunny, hold the side *without* the pins.

(SUNNY flips her fabric over and IRENE leads the class as they feed their pieces of fabric through the sewing-machines in unison, SUNNY slightly behind. In the knot-tying classroom, TYSON looks out the window trying to spot REUBEN.)

TYSON

Now young men, I may have to leave you to practice for a while. I can't seem to see young Reuben out there on the field. I'd better make sure nothing's happened to him. I'm sure you lot are capable of looking after yourselves while I'm gone.

(TYSON EXITS. In the sewing room, BLAKE looks at her fabric and holds it up in horror.)

BLAKE

Oh no!

AMELIA

What is it?

BLAKE

I sewed the wrong side! Now you won't see the pattern! It's ruined.

SUNNY

That's okay, you can just draw the pattern back on. Every mistake is an opportunity. I'm sure I've got a permanent marker here somewhere.

(SUNNY begins rummaging through the items on her desk as REUBEN watches on nervously.)

BLAKE

No I can't! I have about as much artistic talent as a teaspoon, and I don't have enough fabric to cut it out again.

IRENE

Here, use this. You can use the sharp end to un-pick the stitches.

(SUNNY stops searching as IRENE hands a quick un-pick to BLAKE who begins unpicking her stitches angrily.)

SUNNY

What's that?

CLAIRE

Something you won't be getting your hands on anytime soon. Anyone would think you're having an acupuncture session, judging by how many needles are coming out of you!

SUNNY

They must be on a pressure point or something because I do feel very relaxed.

IRENE

At least someone is relaxed.

SUNNY

Maybe *I* should learn acupuncture. I could help people who are really stressed out!

BLAKE

(unpicking her fabric angrily, through gritted teeth)

I think, for your own safety, you should stay away from needles and really stressed-out people.

IRENE

Alright, that's enough! You're all getting distracted, and when you're distracted, that's when mistakes happen. Back to work!

(IRENE goes back to teaching the other girls to sew.  
SUNNY starts chatting to herself again.)

SUNNY

I wonder what Brian will think of my new scrunchie when I get back to school...OW! Goodness me, it's hard to get the pins into the fabric *and* back out again without stabbing your finger!

REUBEN

(quietly to SUNNY from behind her fabric pile)

Why don't you try using a thimble?

SUNNY

What's a thimble? ...Wait, who said that?

REUBEN

Shhh! Look in your sewing basket, it's a small round metal thing. I always thought it looked like the top of a salt and pepper shaker...Come on, it's a piece in Monopoly too.

(SUNNY shuffles her sewing basket off the table into her lap and begins looking through it.)

SUNNY

I thought that piece was a little fairy cup.

REUBEN

You're supposed to wear it on your middle finger so you can push the needle through without hurting yourself.

(SUNNY finds the thimble, puts it on her finger and then begins pushing the pins through the fabric easily.)

SUNNY

This is so much easier! How did you know that's what I needed?

REUBEN

I sneak in here all the time. You're actually at my station. If you look closely, you'll see my initials carved in the corner of the table.

SUNNY

(reading)

R.K.?

REUBEN

Reuben Knotts.

SUNNY

I'm Sunny Goodman. Wait, you're not related to that scary Navy Captain guy, are you?

REUBEN

(annoyed)

He's my Dad, and that over there is Mother dearest, so would you please keep your voice down?

SUNNY

Oh, it's okay. I've been talking to myself the whole time; I think the others have tuned me out.

REUBEN

You are a little... talkative.

SUNNY

Wait, if you get caught in here, won't you get banned from the talent show?

REUBEN

(gesturing to IRENE)

Not if the parents don't find out.

SUNNY

Is that how you learned to sew? Did your Mum teach you?

REUBEN

My Mum would rather die than teach *me* how to sew. She's been sewing ever since I can remember.

SUNNY

The school I'm going to teaches sewing to everyone.

REUBEN

Mum doesn't know I've been watching her the whole time though. I usually sneak in here at night after everyone's asleep and practise all the things I've seen her do.

SUNNY

It's not night-time, why are you here?

REUBEN

I got into trouble for something stupid. Dad sent me to run laps. I thought this would be more fun, and you definitely look like you could use my help. So, what's the big project this year?

SUNNY

We're making our own costumes for the talent show. Ms Steele said I should learn to sew in a straight line before I try anything else, so I've been making scrunchies. I've just had so much trouble getting the pins all lined up straight.

REUBEN

Pass it down here, I'll show you a trick.

(SUNNY passes her fabric down to REUBEN. He pulls off a piece of his thread, ties each end to a pin and then sticks them back in the fabric to create a straight-line guide.)

SUNNY

Is that thread what you've got to carry? It's beautiful.

(He hands the fabric back to SUNNY.)

REUBEN

It's pink. Use the thread as a guide to line the pins up, then they'll all be straight.

(SUNNY begins sticking pins in her fabric enthusiastically.)

SUNNY

Thank you! I'm stuck with light, if you couldn't tell, and it seems like everyone is getting pretty tired of it, so I'm glad you're here. I was beginning to think I'd go through this whole camp without making a friend.

REUBEN

Same. It's funny, I'm not even supposed to be in this class, but it's the most fun I've had on camp so far...

(Suddenly, TYSON bursts into the sewing room.)

...And it'll be the only fun I get to have if *he* finds me! Quick, help!

(SUNNY discreetly tosses more fabric to REUBEN and he covers himself, trying to hide. IRENE goes over to TYSON.)

IRENE

Tyson, just the man I want to see! I need you to move this old equipment out of here so we can use it for the talent show tomorrow night. Just put it in your classroom, you'll be outside most of the day tomorrow anyway.

TYSON

(to IRENE, low and angry)

Where is he?!

IRENE

Where is who? Tyson, don't tell me you've lost one of the boys. Can you imagine what the parents will think!

TYSON

Irene, we *are* his parents. It's Reuben. I sent him out to do laps but he's nowhere to be seen. I figured he'd sulked in here to you.

IRENE

(suddenly flustered, increasingly worried)

Heavens to Betsy. He's not in here. I would've seen him... We'll have to form a search party. What if they tell the parents? How could you do this, Tyson? This is such a mess.

TYSON

Calm down, Irene. Don't tie yourself in a knot!

IRENE

Don't tell me to calm down!

TYSON

(Trying to backtrack.)

It'll be okay. I'll take the boys out; tell 'em we're playing a game. We'll find him.

IRENE

You'd better.

(TYSON EXITS. IRENE turns to the girls.)

You didn't hear any of that did you, girls?

(AMELIA, BLAKE, CLAIRE, and SUNNY look up from their sewing and shrug or shake their heads.)

SUNNY

Any of what?

IRENE

Nothing! Back to work!

(IRENE begins pacing worriedly as TYSON makes his way back to the knot tying classroom. IRENE takes a deep breath before going back to teaching her class. TYSON ENTERS the knot-tying classroom.)

TYSON

Boys, I think it's time to stretch our legs. We're going to play a good old-fashioned game of Cops and Robbers. You'll all be cops and somewhere out there, our robber, Reuben, is hiding.

(AIDEN, MATT, CALEB and WIREMU all cheer.)

AIDEN

Yes! I love playing the good guy.

MATT

Yeah, you're justified cause they deserve whatever's coming to them, cause they're the bad guys.

WIREMU

You know it's not like that, ae. Sometimes people go to jail cause they do bad things, other times it's just bad timing.

MATT

Why'd you say that?

WIREMU

My friend's Uncle went to jail for the night once cause they caught him speeding home and thought he'd robbed the Dairy. He hadn't been anywhere near it, but do you think they believed him? Nah. A night in jail just cause he's brown and wearing a hoodie.

TYSON

Thank you Wiremu, we don't need your full history. We've got a robber of our own to find. Before you start, a couple of rules; no leaving the campgrounds and when you hear the whistle, or it gets to five o'clock, whichever comes first, you must return for dinner. Here, take these flashlights so you don't trip over.

(TYSON takes out a box of flashlights and distributes them.)

Our robber's already out hiding, he could be anywhere. What are you waiting for? Go! Start looking!

(AIDEN, MATT, CALEB, and WIREMU stand up and rush to start looking. They begin searching under desks and in cupboards, pointing their flashlights in all directions.)

CALEB

I'm gonna find him first!

MATT

No, I am!

TYSON

(pointing to the door.)

I don't think he snuck back in here, boys. Why don't you try further afield?

CALEB

Field!

WIREMU

Last one out's a rotten egg!

(AIDEN, MATT, CALEB and WIREMU all race out and EXIT. TYSON begins packing up the chairs and desks, tidying the classroom as he goes. Lights dim on him but he keeps working and while Reuben and Sunny are talking and lit, he begins bringing on boxes of excess sports equipment and a large mirror on wheels, as well as odd items. When he has finished, he EXITS.)

REUBEN

(quietly to SUNNY from under her fabric pile)

That was close.

SUNNY

Your parents seem pretty worried about you. Shouldn't you tell them you're okay?

REUBEN

If I'm found, it'll be the end of this for me. Mum always treats me like I need to be covered in bubble wrap. She'll be too scared I'll get bullied again for causing such a fuss and send me away, you watch.

SUNNY

Bullied *again*?

REUBEN

Why do you think they're making me move to an all-boys' school? It's not 'cause I want to go. It's not my fault my friends decided they'd rather hang out with the popular girls, and the popular girls decided they didn't like me.

SUNNY

You can always make new friends. Sometimes it's good to have a fresh start. You need to look on the bright side. If they treated you like that, they weren't really your friends.

REUBEN

There is no bright side! They were the people I was closest to, and they dropped me. Just like that. I felt like there was something wrong with me for the longest time, and my family didn't help, telling me to hide my thread away, as if my thread is the reason no one likes me.

SUNNY

I like you... as a friend.

REUBEN

You just met me, so you don't count. Hey, pass me a needle, would you?

(SUNNY shuffles her sewing basket off the table into her lap and begins looking through it. She finds a needle and sneaks it down to the pile of fabric as REUBEN's arm reaches out to get it.)

SUNNY

What are you making under there?

REUBEN

A jacket for the talent show, you said that was the project, right? To make a costume?

SUNNY

Oh, right. Yeah. I want to be excited for tomorrow night but all I have are these wonky scrunchies. Everyone's going to make fun of me.

REUBEN

(sarcastically)

Why don't you look on the bright side, at least you have something, right?

(CALEB ENTERS out of breath. He rests for a moment, before he starts shining his light around the girls' stations.)

SUNNY

Well I hope you've nearly finished your costume because one of your classmates just walked in and I think they're looking for you.

REUBEN

Be quiet then! Just act normal.

(SUNNY begins sewing quietly. AMELIA, BLAKE, CLAIRE and CALEB all slowly turn to look at SUNNY. REUBEN uses a coat-hanger to prod her from under the pile. He hisses at her in a whisper)

For *you*, being quiet is not normal. Talk!

SUNNY

(nervously)

So Brian said to me the other day, that he wanted to quit the Church band because he doesn't think playing the piano is cool, but I said why not start playing the keyboard, *that's* cool. Heaps of bands have keyboardists, and you can still play all the same songs.

(AMELIA, BLAKE, and CLAIRE all go back to sewing. CALEB stays looking at SUNNY, not convinced. He begins making his way around the room towards her, but AMELIA stands and stops him.)

AMELIA

So what's your deal then? What makes you think you can just barge into our class and shine a light around?

BLAKE

Yeah, the role of annoying-light-shiner has already been taken, right Sunny?

SUNNY

Right.

CLAIRE

So you can just turn your flashlight off and be on your way then, thank you.

CALEB

We're playing cops and robbers. What if there's a spy hiding in your midst?

AMELIA

I didn't see any spies sneak in.

CALEB

Well, you wouldn't *see* a spy sneak in, would you?

(WIREMU ENTERS, followed by AIDEN and MATT.  
BLAKE and CLAIRE both stand and join AMELIA in  
front of SUNNY.)

MATT

You didn't think we'd be far behind.

AIDEN

Just cause you're a faster runner than us doesn't mean you should be the one to find him!

CALEB

He's in here somewhere, I know it! That weird girl was just talking to herself.

BLAKE

She's not weird, she always does that. It's part of her charm.

SUNNY

I thought you guys didn't like me.

CLAIRE

We like you enough, and we're not about to let these boys turn our classroom upside down. It's about principle.

WIREMU

We might not have to. I have an idea. I'll use my whakataukī.

(WIREMU crouches with his back to the audience, bearing  
his flax.)

Like the honey of the flax flower, me te wai korari!

(Flax stalks rise out of his leaves and bloom into flowers, releasing a sweet scent into the air. The sound of Tūi singing. Suddenly, the pile of fabric next to SUNNY jumps as REUBEN lets out a gigantic sneeze. Everyone turns to look at the pile.)

REUBEN

Achoo!

CALEB

I told you he's here!

IRENE

(Snapping to attention)

You found him?

MATT

He's under that pile of fabric.

AIDEN

We heard him sneeze! But the girls won't let us past.

AMELIA

They shouldn't be in here! This is our space. They're disturbing the peace.

(AMELIA, BLAKE, and CLAIRE face of against AIDEN, MATT AND CALEB. IRENE bursts through them and pulls the sheet off the pile, revealing REUBEN cowering underneath.)

IRENE

(pulling REUBEN up angrily by the arm)

Reuben Timothy Knotts, what were you thinking? Your father and I have been worried sick. You could've fallen into the creek for all we knew, and you've been here the whole time? Working on... what's this?

(IRENE holds up the pink jacket that Reuben has been working on.)

REUBEN

(proudly)

It's my costume I made for the talent show. I'm going to wear it tomorrow night.

IRENE

(pulling REUBEN up angrily)

This? It's not even finished! You won't be wearing *this* for the talent show, you won't be going!

(IRENE tosses REUBEN's jacket onto the ground.)

You will spend the remainder of this camp in detention. Defiance will not be tolerated.

(IRENE begins yanking REUBEN away. SUNNY quickly puts some sewing supplies and fabric under her jacket and then darts out to grab the jacket, hiding that too.)

SUNNY

Aren't you going to give me detention too? Honesty is the best policy. I knew he was there, and I didn't say anything.

IRENE

I bet you heard me worrying too and kept your mouth shut.

SUNNY

Look on the bright side, Ms Steele, absence makes the heart grow fonder-

IRENE

(interrupting)

-Actually, to be honest, I could do without all your positive chatter and that constant radiance is giving me a migraine. Come along then. Sunny and Reuben with me, I'll escort you to detention. The rest of you, back to work.

(IRENE drags SUNNY and REUBEN offstage and they EXIT. Everyone else takes a moment of stunned silence, then resumes what they were working on.)

### SCENE 3

(IRENE escorts SUNNY and REUBEN into the knot tying classroom which is now filled with boxes of excess sports and camp equipment as well as a large, moveable, mirror in the centre. On the other side, in the sewing classroom, AMELIA, BLAKE and CLAIRE enter and begin a silent stylized canon of sewing movements).

IRENE

You'll be spending the rest of the day in here while the boys go on their hunt and the girls finish their garments.

(REUBEN and SUNNY begin marvelling at all the boxes. Reuben goes to pick one up but IRENE slaps his hand away.)

Don't mind all that, I want you both to think hard about your actions and the panic you caused, especially *you*, Reuben.

REUBEN

But Mum, you always do this! You took me out of school when things got tough with my friends and now, you're taking me out of this camp! It's not fair. Why do I have to go to an all-boys school next year, anyway? Why can't I go to Sunny's co-ed school instead? They teach sewing – to girls *and* boys.

IRENE

(interrupting)

-That's enough! You know what your father wants. Now, you are not to leave this room, you hear, and under no circumstances are you to attend the talent show tonight. I expected better, from both of you.

(IRENE EXITS. SUNNY makes herself comfortable on the floor, REUBEN begins pacing.)

REUBEN

The talent show was the only part of this camp I was looking forward to. Now I'm stuck in here.

(REUBEN kicks a pile of chairs.)

SUNNY

It's not all bad. We're not stuck here for eternity. Look at the positives, we could always have our own little talent show, and we wouldn't get stage fright, cause there's no audience!

REUBEN

It wouldn't be the same. I'll never hear the end of this. I tried so hard to impress both my parents and this is what I get. Might as well stay in detention for eternity.

SUNNY

Don't be sad. On the bright side, at least you're not stuck here by yourself.

REUBEN

Why do you always go on about the bright side when there isn't one? You didn't have to confess, you know, you could've stayed in class. Maybe you should have.

SUNNY

I thought we were friends. You were nice to me.

REUBEN

You're nice to everyone, even when they don't deserve it.

SUNNY

I just treat others like I want to be treated. I only wanted to make friends. No one wants to hang out with someone who's always feeling sorry for themselves-

REUBEN

(interrupting, getting frustrated)

-But being happy all the time is just as bad. If you're happy *all* the time, you're just blindly reacting – you're not even reacting at all! Spouting out positive stuff doesn't actually fix anything. I was opening up to you just now, and you didn't even listen.

SUNNY

So tell me then, does complaining about your problems fix them?

REUBEN

No. But it makes me feel better to acknowledge what I'm feeling. Just feel your own emotions and let me feel mine too without trying to 'look on the bright side.'

SUNNY

Why can't you just be happy?

REUBEN

(picking up a cricket ball and turning it over in his hands)

I can't just *be* happy. It's not how I feel. I feel angry.

(he throws the ball at a crate on the shelf, then picks up another)

I feel like trashing this camp with its stupid rules about who's allowed to do what.

SUNNY

Reuben, stop or we'll get in more trouble.

REUBEN

(throwing the cricket ball and picking up another)

They deserve it. They care more about their precious camp than their own son. You know, my dad has missed all of my birthdays, every single one, but he's never missed teaching one of these camps. This'll serve him right.

(REUBEN aims the cricket ball at the large mirror.  
SUNNY realizes what he is doing.)

SUNNY

(screaming)

No!

(SUNNY crouches and hides her light. The room goes pitch black. REUBEN throws the ball anyway. A loud crash can be heard as the mirror shatters. AMELIA, BLAKE and CLAIRE react and look up at each other, but eventually shrug and go back to their sewing.)

What have you done?

REUBEN

Don't move.

SUNNY

This is why I don't like getting angry. There's always so much clean-up.

REUBEN

You know, it'd actually do you good to get angry once in a while. Can you turn your light back on?

SUNNY

Only if you promise you're done destroying stuff.

REUBEN

Fine, I promise.

(SUNNY's light slowly rises, reflecting off the shards of broken mirror like a disco ball.)

REUBEN

(pointing at the light reflecting on the walls)

Sunny! Look, your light!

SUNNY

Wow, it's beautiful.

(They stand, admiring the dancing light for a moment.)

REUBEN

Sunny, I'm sorry. You know I was angry at my parents, right? I didn't mean to take it out on you.

SUNNY

You're right, I didn't deserve any of that. But I understand. I do get angry too, sometimes. When I'm at home I take my guitar out to the barn and belt my heart out to the chickens. It reminds me of being on stage, and that cheers me up.

REUBEN

You were looking forward to the talent show too then, huh?

SUNNY

We could still go. We could sneak in and perform last. On the bright side... I mean, in reality, we're already in trouble, so what more can they do? They can't stop us if we're already on stage.

REUBEN

We haven't got costumes.

SUNNY

Not yet, but...

(SUNNY takes out the sewing supplies she's been hiding. REUBEN's face lights up with excitement. They both begin going through them.)

REUBEN

No way! You even saved my jacket!

SUNNY

You seemed so proud of it, and detention sounded boring, so...

REUBEN

Sunny, thank you. This means the world.

(REUBEN gives SUNNY a hug.)

These reflections are giving me an idea, but I'll need your help. In fact, I don't think I can do it without you.

(SUNNY takes her hand out of the sewing basket and salutes REUBEN. Her hand already has several pins sticking out of it.)

SUNNY

I'm at your service and happy to help!

(REUBEN laughs and they begin sewing costumes together. There is a moment when REUBEN, SUNNY and the AMELIA, BLAKE and CLAIRE are all sewing in unison. It is broken when AIDEN bursts into the sewing room brandishing a rabbit's foot, followed by MATT, CALEB and WIREMU. WIREMU immediately begins tidying things away and setting up for the talent show. Lights fade on the knot tying classroom.)

AIDEN

(Darting around to AMELIA, BLAKE and CLAIRE and taunting them with the Rabbit's foot.)

Who needs a bit of extra luck for the talent show tonight?

AMELIA

You're supposed to say break a leg.

AIDEN

I did break a leg! To get this!

BLAKE

What is it?

AIDEN

It's a lucky rabbit's foot.

CLAIRE

Ew, gross!

MATT

I wonder if that's where the saying comes from?

AMELIA

We don't need any luck for the talent show. I've been working on our act since last year.

CALEB

That's not fair, you guys got a head start!

WIREMU

(Stacking unused chairs)

What are you doing for the show, then? I brought my guitar so I thought I'd do something with that.

MATT

We're actually doing something for Reuben.

WIREMU

Good on you, it sucks that that girl and him aren't allowed in the show.

CALEB

I thought it was weird he wasn't carrying anything. Then his thread fell out.

AIDEN

No one should have to be that ashamed of what they're carrying.

MATT

So, for the talent show, we're gonna be glow-worms!

WIREMU

Glow worms like at Waitomo caves?

AIDEN

Yeah! They're the one animal we could think of that spins thread and uses it for really cool stuff! And Sunny should like it too, cause glow worms glow just like her!

WIREMU

Good on you guys. Like really. A few years ago I felt just like Reuben does. I used to hide my flax at school cause the other kids'd call me Hedgehog Harakeke and say my flax looked like spiky quills, so I wore a big coat to hide it all. He needs something like this to help him see that his thread isn't a bad thing. For me, it was spending time with my whanau and learning how to weave. When everyone saw what I could make with my flax, they were more interested in that. They stopped making fun of me, and I didn't need my big coat anymore.

CLAIRE

I think your flax is cool. You should teach us how to weave sometime.

AMELIA

Nevermind what the boys are doing. *We're* not giving away any secrets about our act, you'll just have to watch it to find out!

WIREMU

(with his arms piled high with sewing supplies)

Are you guys gonna help, or what? The talent show starts soon, and this place still looks like a classroom, not a stage.

BLAKE

Fine, but I'll handle the sewing machines. I don't want one of you boys dropping one. I don't want to be stuck with a wonky machine next year!

CALEB

(Gesturing to MATT, AIDEN, and WIREMU)

But Mr Knotts said *we're* supposed to do the heavy lifting.

BLAKE

I can lift a sewing machine any day. I carry two weeks' worth of shopping home on the bus every second Saturday. We can do more than you think.

(BLAKE clears her sewing station into her sewing supplies basket then packs up her sewing machine and EXITS with her garment in one hand and the sewing machine under her other arm, balanced on her other hip. AMELIA, BLAKE and CLAIRE do the same, but with their garments and sewing supplies baskets.)

WIREMU

Come on then, boys. We can't let the girls show us up.

(AIDEN, MATT, CALEB and WIREMU all pick up items from the sewing classroom and chat as they EXIT with them.)

CALEB

(Racing to the sewing machines)

I bet I can carry two sewing machines!

(CALEB attempts to pick both of them up, realizes how heavy they are, and puts them back down.)

MATT

Put those down and help me with the chairs, would you? I don't want to see how angry they'll get if we break one ...

(Lights dim on the sewing classroom. Various characters may be seen setting up or getting ready for the talent show as SUNNY and REUBEN converse in the knot-tying classroom.)

SCENE 4

(Lights rise on the knot-tying classroom where SUNNY and REUBEN are hurrying to finish their costumes. REUBEN is gathering pieces of the broken mirror, while SUNNY hand-stitches them onto his jacket using her thimble.)

REUBEN

(handing a piece of broken mirror to SUNNY)

Start the song with your light really low, and then, on the chorus make it super bright, so it reflects off the mirrors like a disco ball!

SUNNY

(Taking the piece from REUBEN and using her thimble to sew the mirror to REUBEN's jacket instead of looking him in the eye.)

But won't that be too bright? Everyone's been complaining about my light.

REUBEN

(stopping suddenly)

Why are you still worrying about what they think?

SUNNY

I don't know, *(pause)* I guess I still want everyone to like me afterwards.

REUBEN

Who cares what they like? This is about showing off!

SUNNY

But I was making progress! The other girls stood up for me during Cops and Robbers. They said I had charm.

REUBEN

They also said you were annoying, but you're just going to ignore that, right?

SUNNY

I don't know if this is a good idea... Are you sure 'This Little Light of Mine' is the right song? My light is anything but little.

REUBEN

We'll make it work; it'll be worth it for the big disco ball finale!

(REUBEN begins going through boxes. They both jump as musical fanfare starts to play in the sewing room and then begin looking through the boxes faster. Lights dim on the knot-tying classroom and raise on the sewing room as MATT, CALEB, AIDEN, BLAKE, AMELIA, CLAIRE and WIREMU ENTER dressed in their talent show costumes, followed by TYSON and IRENE. Flats are rolled out on each side of the sewing classroom with a banner that says 'Talent Show'. TYSON places a podium and microphone and then shuffles to the side of the stage. WIREMU distributes cushions in front of the audience and then he, AMELIA, BLAKE, CLAIRE, MATT, AIDEN and CALEB take a seat on them. IRENE strides over to the microphone, taps it, clears her throat, then begins her speech.)

IRENE

Welcome to the annual Talent Show. Campers have been working in groups to create small skits that showcase their talents. The girls have been working extra hard this year and have also made their own costumes. So, without further ado, I give you, the first of our boys' groups, The Hip-Hop Boppin' Glowworms!

(IRENE glares at TYSON who quickly holds up a big sign that says 'applause.' Everyone claps as MATT, AIDEN, and CALEB make their way to the stage and behind the flats. A heavy hip-hop beat begins and MATT, AIDEN, and CALEB come out from behind the flats wearing sleeping bags with torches in the bottom. They do 'the worm' to the centre of the stage, then when the beat drops, they take off their sleeping bags and break out into an impressive choreographed dance. Everyone claps as the dance finishes and they end in a stylised pose. MATT, AIDEN, and CALEB make their way back to their cushions, high-fiving each other as they go.)

That was unexpected...ly entertaining. Let's have another round of applause for our Hip-hop Boppin' Glowworms!

(TYSON holds up the 'applause' sign. Everyone claps. IRENE continues miming a speech as the lights dim on the talent show and raise on SUNNY and REUBEN in the knot-tying classroom, where REUBEN is pulling boxes off the shelves and going through them with fervour.)

SUNNY

Why is there so much junk in here?

REUBEN

(pulling a roll of bubble wrap out of a box)

My Mum's been running this camp a long time. Maybe if we wrapped you in bubble wrap it would dim your light?

(SUNNY tries to distract REUBEN by opening another box. She pulls out a handful of safety pins, then drops them dejectedly)

SUNNY

Ugh, just safety pins in this one.

REUBEN

(turning around to SUNNY, wearing a pair of dark sunglasses)

What about these?

SUNNY

They're cool, but why would we wear those?

REUBEN

*We* wouldn't wear them, we'd give them to the audience! Don't you see Sunny? It's not about dimming your light for the people around you. The right people will find their own way to appreciate it. They'll adjust to *you*.

SUNNY

I don't know, Reuben...

(Lights dim on the knot-tying classroom as lights raise on the sewing classroom, where IRENE is getting ready to introduce the next act.)

IRENE

Our next act is rather special. I've watched these girls master the art of sewing, and so I can't help but feel proud of them. Don't they look pretty in their costumes? Please welcome to the stage, The Thread Poet's Society! They will be sharing some performance poetry they have written together. Give them a hand as they take the stage!

(Everyone claps as AMELIA, BLAKE and CLAIRE make their way to the front of the stage. They retrieve three standing microphones from behind the flats and place them in a triangle formation. They all step back from their microphones except for AMELIA.)

AMELIA

Good evening, we are The Thread Poet's Society and tonight we'll be performing a bit of slam poetry. Yes, we made our own threads, but we can do a lot more than that. If you haven't been to a Poetry Slam before, just a couple of things, if you like a line and you want to show your appreciation, don't clap, that throws us off. Instead, snap your fingers, it's the slam-poet's equivalent of clapping. Wanna give it a go? Pretend I just said an awesome line.... And...

(Everyone including the audience snaps their fingers.)

That's really good! Okay, so we are performing a poem called 'Give us some credit.' Hope it makes you think. Oh, and you *can* clap at the end. Here we go...

(AMELIA steps back from the microphone. They all let out a breath together and step forward to the microphones in unison. They establish a rhythm, stepping in place from one foot to the other.)

AMELIA

When you see a woman trapped in a box by society,  
and you know her fear because you've felt it too,  
how can you stand there, and not feel your insides  
rage against the patriarchy caging her?

AMELIA, BLAKE AND CLAIRE (UNISON)

We are so much more than you give us credit for.

BLAKE

Standing up for other women, it should come naturally.

We are so diverse but share a common thread,

We always treat each other so calm and casually,

But we have a tie to each other, our shared experience.

AMELIA, BLAKE AND CLAIRE (UNISON)

We are so much more than you give us credit for.

CLAIRE

For too long we've been told we are not worth listening to,

so we haven't shared our stories, kept our mouths shut instead.

But now, we listen to each other. We have every reason to.

Stop tearing each other down, try to help out instead.

AMELIA, BLAKE AND CLAIRE (UNISON)

We are so much more than you give us credit for.

AMELIA

I want to challenge you, make you think, make you stand up,

For too long we've been told we need to change just to fit.

Change your hair, change your weight, wear pretty clothes and make-up,

As if these outside things somehow reflect what's within.

AMELIA, BLAKE AND CLAIRE (UNISON)

We are so much more than you give us credit for.

BLAKE

We're taught shame at a young age, told to act like a lady,  
As if we can measure up when we're just knee-high.  
We're told to feel shame with our bodies 'cause our discomfort's profitable;  
So we'll spend money on trends instead of loving what's inside.

AMELIA, BLAKE AND CLAIRE (UNISON)

We are so much more than you give us credit for.

CLAIRE

We need to challenge the idea that we are not good enough,  
That the answer to our problems lies outside ourselves.  
Don't fall for the knight masquerading as a hero,  
You've always been capable of rescuing yourself.

AMELIA, BLAKE AND CLAIRE (UNISON)

We are so much more than you give us credit for.

AMELIA

If a woman's at rock bottom, you cannot just leave her there.  
She's only forgotten she's got power beyond belief,  
Tell her she has strength, enough to move the mountains,  
She can carve rock bottom to steps to a brighter place.

AMELIA, BLAKE AND CLAIRE (UNISON)

We are so much more than you give us credit for.

BLAKE

She's been told for too long, she exists in the margins,  
Not the hero in her story, nor the author, you see.  
Told it's better to be quiet than to ever cause discomfort.  
She's a pseudonymmed novel in a world of TV.

AMELIA, BLAKE AND CLAIRE (UNISON)

We are so much more than you give us credit for.

CLAIRE

I've been told I can only be a certain type of woman.  
My life is set out, I don't choose where it goes.  
Woman wife mother, it should be a choice, not expected,  
But the mould for women was cast in a time before our own.

AMELIA

(freestyle rhythm)

It's static. Like the idea of what a woman should be.

BLAKE

(freestyle rhythm)

The world is changing, so why can't we?

AMELIA, BLAKE AND CLAIRE (UNISON)

(Back in rhythm)

We are so much more than you give us credit for. So let's give more credit to ourselves!

(AMELIA, BLAKE AND CLAIRE step back from their microphones in unison and bow their heads. Everyone cheers and claps as they return their microphone stands and file off stage. TYSON starts to lift the ‘applause’ sign but realizes it is unnecessary and starts clapping himself instead. Lights dim on the sewing classroom and raise on the knot-tying classroom where REUBEN and SUNNY are in costume. REUBEN is practicing their routine, while SUNNY sews hesitantly at one of the stations.)

REUBEN

(singing, gesturing to SUNNY to join in)

This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine.  
This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine.

Hey, Sunny, this is where you come in and turn your light up full power. Then on the next verse, where it’s like “hide it under a bush, oh no,” we can bring Wiremu up on stage and you can hide behind him!

SUNNY

(hesitating)

Reuben...

REUBEN

If you stand over here, next to me, we’ll get the best reflections.

(REUBEN takes SUNNY’s arm and tries to pull her up next to him.)

SUNNY

(resisting)

Reuben, stop!

REUBEN

Come on! Just practice it with me.

SUNNY

(shouting)

No!

(SUNNY breaks free of REUBEN but her costume rips on one of his mirrors in the process. SUNNY stands, flapping her arms at her sides, while making a weird high pitched growling noise. Her light gets brighter and REUBEN adjusts his sunglasses.)

REUBEN

What are you doing?

SUNNY

(shouting, upset)

Shut up! How could you do this. My costume is ruined!

REUBEN

You look like one of your chickens, flapping your arms like that. Here, try this.

(REUBEN reaches into a box on the shelf, takes out a roll of bubble wrap and lays several sheets of it onto the ground.)

SUNNY

Try what?

(REUBEN takes SUNNY's hands and leads her so she is standing on top of the bubble wrap. He then hovers his own foot over it and stomps down, making a popping, crackling noise.)

REUBEN

Do it again, get angry. Yell and scream.

(SUNNY looks blankly at REUBEN, then takes a small step and lets out a weak yell.)

No, you have to commit to it, really let it out-

SUNNY

(getting angry, stomping on the bubble wrap)

Why don't you stop telling me what to do! Everyone always tells me what to do and I'm sick of it! It's always, "Sunny, make sure your sister gets a turn," or "Sunny, practice sewing in a straight line first." Now you're telling me all about this talent show act where I'm supposed to be the spotlight and you've ripped my costume! Did you ever even think to ask if I liked the song? I hate it. They always made me sing it in assembly, no matter what I wanted. Well, this little light of mine? I'm only gonna let it shine when I want to.

(SUNNY stands, panting. REUBEN slowly starts clapping. SUNNY breaks out of her trance and looks at him, her eyes fiery.)

REUBEN

How do you feel?

SUNNY

(still catching her breath)

Better.

REUBEN

We don't have to do the talent show if you don't want to.

SUNNY

We can do the talent show, I just don't want to do that song.

REUBEN

That's fine! I don't care what song we do. I just want to show off my costume.

SUNNY

(picking at the tear in her costume)

Right... My costume.

REUBEN

(dejectedly)

I'm really sorry. Maybe we can fix it?

SUNNY

There isn't enough time.

REUBEN

But I can't do this without you!

(REUBEN hits the shelf angrily and the box of safety pins falls over, spilling out onto the floor.)

SUNNY

(taking out a handful of safety pins from a box)

I guess we could use these.

REUBEN

(taking the safety pins and pinning her costume back together)

Sunny, you're a genius!

SUNNY

I don't know what song to do, though. You're not going to get a bar of 'This Little Light of Mine' out of me!

REUBEN

What do you sing when you're out in the barn with your chickens?

SUNNY

Mostly punk-rock, a little bit of grunge. Why?

REUBEN

You're full of surprises. But that does give me an idea. I'm pretty sure there's an old tartan blanket with the sports equipment. And there's lots of rope!

(REUBEN begins looking through the boxes. He finds a red tartan flag and rushes over to SUNNY, using the safety pins to make it into a kilt.)

SUNNY

Actually, I have an idea too. We'll have to hurry though. I think everyone's performed except Wiremu.

(Lights dim on the knot-tying classroom and raise on the sewing room as IRENE makes her way to the podium to introduce the next act.)

IRENE

That brings us to our final act of the night, the multi-talented Wiremu, who has prepared a story for you all. Please, welcome him to the stage!

(TYSON holds up the ‘applause’ sign and everyone claps as WIREMU makes his way to the stage, retrieves a chair, microphone and guitar from behind the flats and then sits centre stage.)

WIREMU

(playing soft instrumental guitar as he speaks, then singing to the tune of “The Queen and the Soldier” by Suzanne Vega)

Kia ora koutou. I’m Wiremu. Today I’m going to tell you a tale about a hedgehog. Now, this little hedgehog he just wanted to have friends.

The hedgehog was longing for some friends to hug  
But every time he went in, they all threw their hands up,  
And said, “We are not ones to be all tight and smug,  
But we don’t like bein’ stabbed by your quills.”  
The hedgehog, he left with a tear in his eye,  
He cursed at his quills, and he asked, “God why,  
Was I given this body people don’t want to hug?  
All I want is a friend I can love.”

So the hedgehog went home and he told his brother Bill,  
He said, “All my friends hate me, because of my quills,  
They say they’re too spiky for anyone to hug,  
All I want is someone to be my bud.”

So his brother Bill took him in his arms and said, “Hey,  
You’re worth more to me than anyone could ever say,  
And if anyone tells you different, you just turn away,  
And say my quills are what makes me who I am.”

The very next day, when the hedgehog went to school,  
He saw his friends, they said “we were not being very cool”,  
We got you this present, now don’t be a fool,  
Open it up and see what’s inside.”

The hedgehog, he opened it then his smile fell through the floor,  
He said, “These are just pellets, it’s empty, what for?”  
And his friends, they felt his hurt, deep down at their core,  
As they put the packing pellets onto his quills.

Then his friends took the hedgehog in a warm embrace,  
And all doubts about their friendship vanished without a trace,  
They said, “We love you with your quills and we are willing to change.”  
And the Hedgehog, he felt happy inside.  
And the Hedgehog felt happy inside.

(WIREMU finishes playing. REUBEN and SUNNY sneak  
on stage and hide behind the flats. A couple of the camp  
participants notice and point.)

And that was my story, thank you very much!

(TYSON races to hold up the applause sign as the crowd erupts into cheers and applause. WIREMU takes his gear behind the flats and then returns to the cushions as IRENE makes her way to the microphone. WIREMU sends whispers among the other camp participants as IRENE speaks.)

IRENE

What a story! That poor hedgehog, all he wanted was a hug, but he got there in the end. Well, that concludes our evening's festivities-

(Suddenly, the participants on the cushions begin banging on the ground and chanting "Encore!")

-What do you mean encore? We haven't got any more acts!

AIDEN

(to IRENE)

They're behind the flats, get off the stage!

CLAIRE

Yeah! I wanna see them perform!

IRENE

See who perform? You don't mean...

TYSON

(to IRENE, taking her arm and guiding her to the side of the stage)

Come over here dear, just this once.

(AMELIA, BLAKE, CLAIRE, MATT, AIDEN, CALEB, and WIREMU'S banging and chanting turns into a rhythmic "stomp, clap, stomp, clap" rhythm. The audience is encouraged to join in. REUBEN emerges from behind the flats, wearing his pink jacket suit with mirrors sewn in and a pair of dark sunglasses. He is carrying a basket full of pairs of sunglasses, which he hands to WIREMU, who takes a pair and then distributes them to the rest of the audience.)

REUBEN

You'll need those. It's going to get bright! My friend Sunny has something to say.

(REUBEN whistles and gestures to the flats as SUNNY emerges dressed like a punk-rocker, holding Wiremu's guitar. Her light is brighter and more radiant, and as she approaches REUBEN, playing the opening chords to her song, her light reflects off his mirrors like a disco ball. REUBEN performs like a punk rocker/ cheerleader hybrid, bouncing around the stage, sending his reflections everywhere as SUNNY sings her heart out to the girls on the cushions and IRENE.)

SUNNY

(singing)

I'm tired of looking on the bright side,  
Hoping I could see right through  
All the comments that you spew.

I'm tired of putting on a bright smile,  
Hoping I'd be fine while, they all tuned me out,  
Well I'm not fine. No, not this time.

I tried to put it into words so you can see, I'm angry!  
The words I hear I let 'em slide right by, but frankly, I'm  
angry!

I'm getting real tired, of  
Looking on the bright side,  
Tryin'a (*beat*) let my feelings slide,  
Do they even care, how I feel inside? Well I'll tell 'em I'm  
angry!

I tried to put it into words so you can see, I'm angry! Can't you hear me?

The words I hear I let 'em slide right by, but frankly, I'm angry!

(SUNNY begins to climb to a high point on stage. She has a rope attached to her.)

Now I'm only looking on the bright side,  
When I think the time's right to,  
Gonna shine my light when I choose.

No more putting on a fake smile,  
Now I know it takes time to  
Be yourself and let your feelings be true.

(When SUNNY reaches the highest point, Reuben pulls the other end of the rope, causing SUNNY to ascend even higher, swinging as though she is flying. Everyone gasps, TYSON runs forward as if to catch SUNNY, thinking the knot will come undone, but IRENE takes his shoulder and leads him back. The knot holds.)

I tried to put it into words so you can see, I'm fi-----nally free! Yeah!

I tried to put it into words so you can see, I'm fi-----nally free! Yeah!

(REUBEN lowers SUNNY and they pose in a big finish. SUNNY does a curtsey and REUBEN does a pirouette and then bows. Everyone applauds.)

CALEB

(interrupting, Shouting and pointing at REUBEN)

Huh, gay!

(Everyone stops and looks at REUBEN, who slowly turns to look at CALEB. IRENE looks on worriedly but TYSON steps in front of her before she can intervene.)

REUBEN

(slowly)

What did you say to me?

CALEB

You're wearing pink and you're singing and dancing. You snuck into the *girl's* class and now, you're performing with a *girl*. You are *so* gay!

REUBEN

(stepping forward, talking to the tech desk)

Give me a beat, so I can help this guy understand.

(A hip-hop beat begins to play and REUBEN begins to rap)

Hold up dude, and let me explain,

I'm not being rude, I'm just playing my own game, laying a new claim,

there's nothing wrong with me, I'm an arrow staying true to its aim.

I got no shame. My dreams are bigger than the town from which I came.

All the rules are dumb, the ones that keep me from believing

That the pursuits I wanna take, mean I'll always be receiving,

All the flack and all the hate,

Try to take it back but it's all too late.

No, I'm not gay, I just like fashion,

Pink's my favourite colour and sewing is my passion,

Got all these skills, all I wanna do is cash 'em in

And the world keeps telling me to pack it in.

Can't you have some compassion,  
for the outcasts and inspired,  
Who live their lives with passion?  
No binaries required.

No I'm not gay, but if I was,  
then that'd be okay, and I know that because  
My idols keep on slaying no matter what,  
Who you kiss got nothin' to do with the talent that you've got.

Hey, wait, it's my voice like thunder again,  
Tryin'a make sure that you understand,  
I might not be gay but I'm 'bout to take a stand,  
And say hate's not okay with me before things get out of hand.

(REUBEN drops his microphone and walks to the back of the stage, SUNNY follows him. The crowd clap and cheer for REUBEN. CALEB gets up and goes over to REUBEN sheepishly.)

CALEB

Hey, Reuben. I'm sorry.

REUBEN

I appreciate the apology.

CALEB

I didn't understand.

REUBEN

You *assumed*. I'm tired of people making assumptions about me and telling me what they think I am... I'm me. I know *some* things about myself, but I'm still figuring the rest out. No one needs to be judged while they're doing that.

CALEB

I guess I assume things more than I think.

REUBEN

Everyone does. Just remember, when you assume, you make an ass out of you and me.

(AIDEN and MATT join REUBEN and CALEB.)

AIDEN

(To REUBEN)

Hey, you're punny. Nice rap.

MATT

(To REUBEN)

And great job with that lift, I'd be too scared to tie knots like that!

CALEB

Are you kidding, he's fine and cable.

AIDEN

It was down to the wire, but he did it of his own *accord*.

MATT

I was worried at first, but in the end it all turned out twine.

(CLAIRE, AMELIA, BLAKE and WIREMU have wandered over to join the conversation.)

CLAIRE

You guys should've done stand up!

WIREMU

There's always next year.

AMELIA

I'd love to see that. I've already got ideas for our next act!

BLAKE

(joining the conversation, to AMELIA)

Me too! Wanna meet up in winter break and collab?

AMELIA

(To BLAKE)

Sure, you can tell me and Claire about it on the bus ride home.

(IRENE, catches REUBEN's arm as he walks past.)

IRENE

(to REUBEN)

Those costumes were simply spectacular! Did you make them yourself?

REUBEN

Yeah, I learned from watching you. I thought you'd be mad.

IRENE

I just wanted to protect you. I didn't realize what you were capable of. Maybe next year, you could help me teach the sewing class?

REUBEN

Maybe, that depends...

TYSON

(interrupting)

That knot, boy! I thought that poor girl was going to end up a pancake!

IRENE

-But she didn't.

TYSON

What knot did you use?

REUBEN

I used the impossible knot. You said it's impossible to untie, so I thought it'd hold Sunny, and it did!

TYSON

How did you learn that, boy? You weren't in class.

REUBEN

Your instructions were still on the board when we got detention, so I taught myself. I used them to tie the mirrors onto my costume too.

TYSON

That's very good, son. Very good.

REUBEN

(to IRENE and TYSON)

Actually, Mum, but Dad especially, there's something I've been meaning to talk to you about.

TYSON

Go on then, boy, spit it out.

REUBEN

I've been talking to Sunny, and her school has sewing classes. All I want to do is sew and make clothes. Can I go there instead of the boys' school next year?

TYSON

We'll see.

REUBEN

It's not a no!

SUNNY

Now I've got *you* looking on the bright side!

IRENE

(to REUBEN)

We'll see when he's at sea.

*The End.*

## Play IV: Wool and Wood

Wool and Wood

A short play

By Jessica Ramage

## SUMMARY

Two unlikely roommates are thrown together at a holiday camp; Dolly, who carries a huge ball of wool and is bubbly, imaginative, organised, and always feels the cold; and Willow, who is a quiet, motivated, sporty type, though she is recovering from an ankle injury and has to drag around a tree-branch wherever she goes. When a storm cancels the camp activities and forces them to stay in their dorms, the girls must forge a friendship by teaching each other a skill. Willow knows how to knit, and Dolly knows how to carve wood, but will they be able to open up to each other and learn new ways to manage their items, or will their differences be too much?

## CHARACTERS

DOLLY	A girl, around 13, she carries a large ball of wool attached to her ankle like a shackle wherever she goes. Always worries about too many things. A-Type personality.
WILLOW	A girl, around 13, she drags a large, long branch from a tree around with her, and is a quiet, motivated, sporty type.
IRENE (INTERCOM VOICE)	(Can be pre-recorded). An older woman in her fifties, Camp Coordinator.

## SETTING

New Dawns leadership camp for young people. A parallel universe where people can see the things (pressures/ worries/ influences) they carry around with them, which take the form of large cumbersome items unique to each person.

## TIME

Spring, the holidays after middle school.

## PRODUCTION NOTES

These are simply suggestions, so the production team doesn't feel overwhelmed by the absurd prop aspects, feel free to ignore.

Dolly's ball of wool should be very large, to the point it is awkward to drag around. This could be created by using a large basketball or even a yoga ball and covering it with wool or rope made to look like wool. Willow's branch should also be large and cumbersome.

When Dolly and Willow are creating their respective scarf and walking stick out of Dolly's wool and Willow's branch, the fully made items can be preset under the beds so that they can replace their items swiftly during the series of stylised freeze-frames.

## SCENE I

(A dormitory, two beds and two desks, two sets of drawers and a window. The sound of high wind and heavy rain. DOLLY enters, wearing a soaking wet raincoat and looking bedraggled. She is covered in wool threads and is dragging a suitcase behind her as well as doing her best to keep her large ball of wool from getting wet. She takes off the raincoat, shakes herself off, shivering, then puts the suitcase on a bed and begins to unpack. WILLOW enters, also soaking wet. She walks with a limp and struggles to fit both a large tree-branch and her suitcase through the door.)

DOLLY

My hands are frozen! I almost dropped my wool coming up those stairs. I'm surprised your branch didn't get blown away. Let me help.

(DOLLY goes to try and take the suitcase from WILLOW but WILLOW stubbornly pulls it free just before DOLLY reaches her.)

WILLOW

Don't comment on what I'm carrying. You haven't even introduced yourself.

(WILLOW puts her suitcase on the other bed and begins to unpack.)

DOLLY

Sorry. I just meant you must be really strong to be able to carry so much. My name's Dolly.

WILLOW

Like Dolly Parton?

DOLLY

No, like the famous sheep.

WILLOW

Sheep?

DOLLY

(DOLLY starts playing with her wool threads.)

Sheep. My real name's Daria, but everyone started calling me that after we learned about Dolly the cloned sheep in genetics, and well, it stuck.

WILLOW

Snap, I guess.

(WILLOW looks down at her branch.)

You can call me Willow, everyone else does.

DOLLY

Oh, Willow is such a pretty name-

WILLOW

(interrupting, holding up her branch.)

-Nickname. It's better than Dolly, no offence. You're not Australian too, are you?

DOLLY

No, why?

WILLOW

What do you get if you mix a sheep and a kangaroo?

DOLLY

What?

WILLOW

A woolly jumper.

(DOLLY giggles.)

DOLLY

I wish I had a jumper; this cabin is freezing!

WILLOW

So, I guess we're roommates?

DOLLY

You bet we are!

WILLOW

(With no enthusiasm.)

Great... We're not going to be stuck here the *whole* time, are we? I'm sure the brochure said something about a hike.

(DOLLY begins pacing excitedly.)

DOLLY

The brochure said we're going to learn to be leaders, to be the women of tomorrow. We're going to learn-

WILLOW

-I know what the brochure said.

(DOLLY's wool gets caught on the drawers. She keeps pacing.)

DOLLY

It's not just hiking. We get to build bivouacs and go orienteering and read maps and cook on a campfire....

(Sudden downpour of rain outside. Thunder cracks.)

WILLOW

In the pouring rain, apparently.

(DOLLY's face falls in disappointment.)

INTERCOM VOICE

('Bing bong' Chime over speakers.)

Is this on? Ugh, Tyson always does these, lucky him being away on a boat right now. Everything's flooded, I suppose a boat's the best place to be... Is this the right button?

(Static feedback over speaker. DOLLY and WILLOW wince.)

Ooh! Sorry about that, that's better. Welcome to New Dawns leadership camp, I am Irene Steele. It seems the heavens have opened up and told us we need to be indoors today. The river is up, and the rain is relentless. So, I'm afraid you will not be going on a hike. Good young ladies don't go out in the rain. Use this

opportunity to get to know your roommate. Networking skills are much more important for a young lady than to have strong calves.

WILLOW

So much for hiking...

DOLLY

That's so annoying! I put all the camp activities in my calendar.

(DOLLY holds up her phone, proudly)

...Well, I thought they were in here. Oh, no! They're all in next month! Now I have to rearrange them all!

WILLOW

You do that. I'm going to go see what the main hall is like. I heard they have a basketball hoop.

(DOLLY begins frustratedly fiddling with her phone. WILLOW gets up to leave but stops in exasperation when she hears the 'bing bong' chime.)

INTERCOM VOICE

('Bing bong' Chime over speakers.)

Hello again ladies. I have just been told the roof of the main hall is leaking, so it is now out of bounds. Just stay in your rooms and make friends with your roommates, we don't want all you young ladies wandering around in this storm! Your roommate will be your buddy throughout this camp. Stick together. I don't want to see anyone by themselves, or it will be mopping and cooking duty for both of you!

WILLOW

That's crap! Why should we have to listen to bing bong lady? I want to go outside!

DOLLY

Her name's Irene, and didn't you hear her say good young ladies don't go out in the rain?

WILLOW

Why do you care what she says?

DOLLY

I want to do well on this camp.

WILLOW

It's camp, not school. You won't get a grade; you'll get a participation award at best!

DOLLY

I won't even get that if I listen to you!

(DOLLY begins pacing.)

At least now, I'll have time to work on my scholarship essay, and practice my lines for the show...

WILLOW

(With no enthusiasm.)

Yay.

DOLLY

I have to get it done. The trip out here put me behind already. I get car sick so I couldn't study on the way.

WILLOW

Sounds like you care way too much.

(DOLLY's wool gets caught on the handle of a drawer and pulls it out, spilling its contents. She stops, frustrated and hurt.)

DOLLY

Sounds like you don't care enough! You're the worst roommate ever!

(A few beats of silence as DOLLY tensely puts things back in her drawer. WILLOW looks hurt, then looks down and picks up DOLLY's wood carving tools which have also fallen out of the drawer and rolled towards her. WILLOW goes over to hand them back. DOLLY takes them without looking at her.)

WILLOW

What are these?

DOLLY

None of your business!

WILLOW

Whatever.

(WILLOW starts walking towards the door.)

DOLLY

We're not supposed to go anywhere by ourselves!

WILLOW

They can't stop me going to the bathroom.

(DOLLY gets up to go with her.)

I think I can manage the bathroom by myself, thanks.

DOLLY

But the buddy system...

WILLOW

It's not like they're watching us through that speaker, it's not a telescreen!

(WILLOW pauses near the door and looks up at the intercom speaker, defiantly willing it to 'bing bong.' It doesn't.)

DOLLY

Why don't you make like your branch and leaf then?

WILLOW

Fine, I will.

(WILLOW starts to leave but is stopped by the 'bing bong' chime. She rolls her eyes.)

INTERCOM VOICE

(‘Bing bong’ chime over speakers. Static sound of someone tapping a microphone.)

Good evening ladies, one last thing. Dinner is in half an hour. Please be prompt as the food will not stay hot. Boys will dine in the chapel and girls are to dine in the staff quarters. Remember to wear your rain jackets, no one wants to see frizzy hair.

WILLOW

Guess I’ll see you at dinner then. Meet you at the stairs in a bit?

(WILLOW starts walking towards the door.)

DOLLY

I’m not coming.

WILLOW

But you’re the one who wanted to follow the ru- ...never mind, suit yourself.

(WILLOW EXITS. DOLLY takes out a book and pen and speaks out loud to herself as she writes.)

DOLLY

Deary diary, I didn’t mean to snap. It’s just, I’ve worked hard to be here. I planned every detail of this camp, and now nothing is going to plan! I didn’t try my hardest in school, and walk dogs all summer, scrape and save and balance everything, just to fall short because of some rain and a bad roommate.

(DOLLY puts down her pen and starts to fiddle with her wool).

It’s hard enough dragging this around without it getting wet.

(WILLOW ENTERS, she is muddy and wind-swept. DOLLY quickly puts her book away.)

WILLOW

Eew, yuck!

(WILLOW holds her nose and goes over to open the window, using her branch to try and waft the air out.)

DOLLY

What?

WILLOW

It smells like wet sheep in here.

DOLLY

Sorry, my wool picks up everything, I'm trying not to get it wet. You're back early.

WILLOW

Yeah... The boys were playing rugby outside, I decided to join in and got in trouble because apparently 'it's unladylike.' It's just a bit of mud. Irene, the camp lady, sent me back here when she realized I wasn't with my buddy.

DOLLY

You should've listened to Irene!

WILLOW

At least I had some fun!

DOLLY

Hey, can you shut that window? I'm freezing.

WILLOW

You're always freezing.

(WILLOW shuts the window, then goes to the end of her bed, lays her branch horizontally between the bed and set of drawers and begins using it as a bar to do ballet stretches.)

DOLLY

You do ballet?

(WILLOW continues stretching while talking.)

WILLOW

What about it?

DOLLY

Nothing, you just don't seem like the type.

WILLOW

Why? Cause I'm not the perfect pretty little princess ballerina everyone thinks of when they hear the word?

DOLLY

It just seems like you like being outside too much. My friend's sister does ballet and she says being in the studio is like being frozen in time; you never know if it'll be light or dark outside when you leave.

WILLOW

She's got that right.

(beat.)

DOLLY

I'm sorry I said you were the worst roommate. I'm sure there are way worse. It's just... I can't stand it when people call me a try-hard... at least I'm trying.

WILLOW

I didn't call you a try hard, I just said you care too much. I used to be like that. Then I realized it wasn't worth trying to please *everyone*, just some people.

DOLLY

What do you mean?

WILLOW

I didn't want to come on this camp. My Mum made me. She thought it would help my ankle heal so I can get back on point sooner.

(WILLOW puts a little too much weight on her hurt ankle and winces in pain.)

DOLLY

Do you like doing ballet?

WILLOW

(Makes an unhappy face, but quickly hides it.)

What's with you and the personal questions?

(WILLOW puts her branch back on the floor.)

DOLLY

We're supposed to get along with our roommate... never mind.

(WILLOW starts looking for something in her bag.)

WILLOW

Where the ...

DOLLY

What are you looking for?

WILLOW

None of your business.

DOLLY

I can't help you find it if I don't know what we're looking for.

WILLOW

My crochet hooks.

DOLLY

You don't look like someone who crochets.

WILLOW

What does someone who crochets look like?

DOLLY

I don't know, old? I was always scared of doing stuff like that and getting called granny.

WILLOW

Huh, we're not granny squares, we're hookers!

(DOLLY looks shocked at the word)

Cause we use crochet hooks?

DOLLY

Right.

WILLOW

You can make way cooler things than granny squares and blankets, though. Have you ever heard of yarn bombing?

DOLLY

No.

WILLOW

There's a group that goes around making yarn art out of random things around town. They made beanies and scarves for all the tree stumps after the council chopped the local forest down. Crocheting helps me relax. I don't know how I'm going to sleep now.

(WILLOW dims the lights and climbs into bed.)

DOLLY

It's easy. You just lie down, close your eyes, look at the back of your eyelids and think about nothing until your breathing slows down, like this...

(DOLLY snuggles into her bed, slows her breathing and after a few beats of silence, begins to snore softly.)

WILLOW

(softly)

Dolly?

(a few beats of silence, Dolly snores quietly.)

Of course, it's that easy for you...

(WILLOW begins tossing and turning in bed. Eventually she tosses so much her branch is tossed out of bed a significant distance away, causing her to fall out of bed after it. She groans, trudges over and picks up groggily and goes back to bed. The rain and wind outside get louder. Suddenly there is a loud crack. WILLOW sits up.)

Did you hear that, Dolly?

(DOLLY stirs but doesn't wake up.)

Of course not. Guess it's easier to fall asleep with soft wool in your bed than a spiky branch! Ugh, all that rain. Now I need to pee!

(WILLOW gets out of bed again, busting to pee, but forgets to pick up her branch. Her steps get heavier the further away she gets from the branch until she is stuck. She is busting. She struggles against it, then realizes she has forgotten her branch.)

Oh no, not again!

(WILLOW waddles back to her bed, picks up her branch and then quickly EXITS, on her way out she kicks the door.)

Ow! Now my stupid foot is never going to heal!

(Lights fade. WILLOW ENTERS after a few moments and crawls back into bed, tossing and turning. She begins to settle, but after a few moments of calm, a giant crash can be heard. WILLOW sits bolt upright in bed and looks over at DOLLY who snores. WILLOW settles in unrest.)

## SCENE II

(Lights fade back up again. It is morning as WILLOW finally falls asleep. A few beats and then DOLLY and WILLOW are startled awake by the 'bing bong' chime. WILLOW mutters angrily about being woken up.)

INTERCOM VOICE

('Bing bong' chime over speakers. Static sound of someone tapping a microphone.)

Good morning, everyone. Unfortunately, we had a tree come down on the roof of the main hall overnight. You'll be staying in your dorms again today while we get it fixed. Your new activity is to learn a skill from your roommate. Ask them questions. By the end of tomorrow, I want you each to have learned how to do something new from your buddy. You never know what someone has to offer.

WILLOW

I thought I heard something last night. I barely got to sleep. Then that blasted 'bing bong' woke me up.

DOLLY

I'm just glad no one got hurt!

WILLOW

(sarcastically)

If someone did, we might've got sent home, now that would've been a real disaster!

DOLLY

Don't joke about that! What do you think of our new task? I think this whole asking each other questions thing is great. It'll get us ready for the first day of high school, when everyone goes around asking what electives everyone's taking.

WILLOW

Go on then.

DOLLY

Go on what?

WILLOW

Tell me what your elective will be.

DOLLY

You first.

WILLOW

Why don't you guess? I bet I can guess yours easy. You're gonna do drama, right? You seem like the dramatic type.

DOLLY

Actually, my school has an environmental elective. I was thinking of taking that, then I can still do theatre but it's for a purpose, you know? And I can learn other stuff too, like how to grow my own food.

WILLOW

That sounds cool, I wish I could do something like that. I love being outside.

DOLLY

So, I'm guessing the elective you *want* to take isn't the one you're *going* to take?

WILLOW

Yeah. My parents are making me take dance. I feel like all I do is dance.

DOLLY

(DOLLY starts walking around WILLOW, tangling WILLOW in her wool.)

Is that how you hurt your ankle?

WILLOW

I hurt my ankle because I had to wear those blasted point-shoes!

DOLLY

You must be really good! My friend's sister didn't start on point shoes until she was fifteen!

WILLOW

I wish I was allowed to wait that long. I'm not allowed back on point again until it heals but mum says if I practice every night, it'll heal sooner.

DOLLY

(DOLLY stops.)

Your mum's wrong.

WILLOW

What?

DOLLY

(DOLLY stops.)

You need time to heal. I saw how much those stretches hurt you last night. It's a good thing the hike was cancelled, what was your mum thinking?

WILLOW

(Defensive.)

Don't talk about my mum.

DOLLY

(DOLLY walks back around WILLOW, untangling her from the wool as she talks.)

I'm sorry. I don't mean to be insensitive. I just always have so many thoughts running through my head, sometimes it's hard to filter what's right to say. I'll try and think more before I open my mouth next time.

WILLOW

It's okay, you might be right. My ankle always feels worse after I practice.

DOLLY

I won't tell if you skip practice tonight.

WILLOW

Thanks.

(DOLLY finishes untangling WILLOW. WILLOW gets up and slumps on her bed.)

I don't know what skill I can teach you unless you want to learn ballet. Mum's probably told Irene I'm a ballerina, it's what they'll be expecting.

DOLLY

Why do we have to do something they'll expect?

WILLOW

I can't believe I left my crochet hooks at home. It would've been perfect! You've got the wool!

(DOLLY looks thoughtfully at WILLOW's branch, then takes her wood carving tools out of her drawer and approaches WILLOW.)

DOLLY

I don't know... I don't think I could ever untangle all this anyway, but I did bring my carving tools. That's what you saw yesterday. I thought we'd be making bivouacs, but the only branch around here is the one you brought.

(WILLOW starts backing away from DOLLY and her tools.)

WILLOW

I don't want you to butcher my branch, thank you very much. You'll break it!

DOLLY

I won't break it. I just thought it'd be easier to carry if it wasn't so... branchy. You could even use it as a walking stick to help you heal while you've got a sore ankle.

WILLOW

That's actually not a terrible idea...

DOLLY

Come on then!

(WILLOW hands DOLLY the branch and she begins stripping the branches off the central trunk with one of the knives. She puts the rest of the tools on her nightstand. WILLOW picks up one of the discarded branches.)

WILLOW

I never thought about making it easier to carry.

DOLLY

Pass me my whittling knife? It's the one with the wooden handle.

WILLOW

It already looks better!

DOLLY

Grab the sandpaper too; I won't be long with this.

(WILLOW drops the discarded piece of branch and goes to the nightstand to get the tools. She returns and hands the whittling knife to DOLLY.)

Thanks.

(Lights slowly fade to black as DOLLY carves the branch into a long straight walking stick while WILLOW helps.)

WILLOW

This is cool! What can I do?

DOLLY

Can you help me keep it steady while I saw the bottom? Then you can sand it.

WILLOW

You bet!

(Lights fully down, sounds of sawing and sanding fade.)

### SCENE III

(Lights fade back up again. It is early evening. WILLOW and DOLLY have swapped places. WILLOW is now sanding a nearly finished walking stick, while DOLLY has her back to WILLOW, whittling something small out of one of the discarded branches. They are both startled by the 'bing bong' chime.)

#### INTERCOM VOICE

('Bing bong' chime over speakers. Static sound of someone tapping a microphone.)

Good evening ladies, I hope you are staying nice and warm in your rooms and learning lots of new skills to make you into educated young women. Dinner is in the main hall tonight, the roof has been fixed. See you there in half an hour.

#### WILLOW

Today went so fast! I can't believe it's almost dinner.

#### DOLLY

Time flies when you're having fun.

#### WILLOW

No one in my family knows how to carve. I'll be the first! I still don't know what I'm going to teach *you* though.

#### DOLLY

Well...

#### WILLOW

Well, what? What have you been working on over there all secretively?

(DOLLY turns away further from WILLOW so she can't see.)

#### DOLLY

It's not finished! And I don't think I got the hooks right, but you might be able to use these for your crochet.

(DOLLY hands WILLOW two carved crochet hooks, made out of the smaller discarded branches from WILLOW'S walking stick.)

WILLOW

Thanks Dolly! This is awesome! ...But you only need one hook for crochet. It's knitting that uses two needles.

DOLLY

(Suddenly sheepish)

Oh... I must've got confused...

WILLOW

No, it's perfect! We can both crochet! That can be my skill. We'll start after dinner.

DOLLY

Awesome!

WILLOW

Let's go!

DOLLY

I'll just get my jacket; it's freezing out there.

(DOLLY retrieves a jacket from her bag and DOLLY and WILLOW EXIT as lights fade to black.)

#### SCENE IV

(Lights fade back up again. As DOLLY ENTERS. She sits on her bed, anxiously untangling her wool and looking at the door. After a few beats, WILLOW enters, covered in fresh mud but beaming.)

DOLLY

Where were you? We were supposed to come straight back to our rooms after dinner. You know Irene said it's important to get our beauty sleep!

WILLOW

You know what I said about not pleasing *everyone*? Well Irene's far down my list. If I listened to her, I never would have found my passion!

DOLLY

And what's that?

WILLOW

Forget ballet, I'm starting hockey! I was going to come straight back, I swear I was, but then I saw the boys playing on the field. Normally I wouldn't have joined in, but you helped me make this wonderful stick, and I couldn't resist!

(WILLOW holds out her walking stick proudly, then uses it to scoop DOLLY's ball of wool off the bed, using it as a hockey ball and acts out shooting a goal as she talks.)

I ran over and scooped the ball, then whacked it into the goal from halfway across the field! The boys were in awe; they want me to go back and play tomorrow too!

(DOLLY gets up to retrieve her ball of wool.)

DOLLY

That's awesome, really ama- ah, ah, ah choo!

WILLOW

For someone that's always tangled in wool, you sure are cold a lot.

DOLLY

I started untangling it, if you still wanted to crochet, but I didn't get very far. I've tried so many times, but it always gets messed up again.

WILLOW

Oh, that's right! The crochet hooks! Sorry I forgot. Here, let me help. You can see it better when you're not tangled up in it.

(WILLOW begins detangling DOLLY'S wool.)

There are so many colours here, you're going to have more than enough for a really pretty scarf.

DOLLY

You think so? I always thought it was just a big, tangled mess; that I'd never be able to make anything out of it.

WILLOW

I've seen people make heaps of cool crocheted things. There's a style called amigurumi that makes the cutest little plushies, or you can make more practical things. A girl at my school crocheted her own tyre-covers for her wheelchair, and when they spin, it's like a kaleidoscope!

DOLLY

I don't think I'll be able to make anything as cool as that.

WILLOW

Once you learn the stitches, it's all about counting. You can use a different combination to make just about anything! There was a woman who crocheted coral reefs and installed them in shopping malls to raise awareness of climate change. You could do something like that for your enviro elective.

DOLLY

I could turn people's recycling bins into hungry hungry hippos or put crocheted chickens on the egg shelves at the supermarket... I don't know if I'd have the courage to actually do any of that, though.

WILLOW

You'll find the right people to help you. Here. I'll show you how to make a slip knot and a foundation chain. Then we'll work on single crochet.

(WILLOW takes DOLLY'S wool and begins crocheting a chain with it.)

See that? I've done two, now you try. We want twenty-four.

(WILLOW hands the crochet hook and wool to DOLLY, who takes it and begins trying hard to crochet. Lights begin to slowly fade.)

DOLLY

(counting chains as she crochets)

Three, four, five...

WILLOW

You're a natural. It's relaxing cause you have to focus on what you're doing, and you can't let your mind wander. Just focus on one stitch at a time. And if you make a mistake, you can always frog it. Careful though, once you've worked out the rhythm, it's addictive.

DOLLY

(crocheting rhythmically and slightly faster.)

I see what you mean.

(Lights completely fade to black.)

#### SCENE IV

(Lights slowly fade back up again. WILLOW has fallen asleep on top of her bed and is lightly snoring. DOLLY is now wearing her scarf and crocheting a new project. She finishes it and quickly drags her chair over to the intercom so she can reach it. Her project is a crocheted pair of earmuffs, which she carefully places over the intercom speaker. The 'bing bong' chime is muffled quieter this time, so WILLOW doesn't wake up.)

#### INTERCOM VOICE

(Muffled 'Bing bong' chime over speakers, muffled voice.)

Good morning ladies, good news! The bus has finally been able to get past the floods and you can all go home. I know this camp hasn't been what you expected, but for some of you I hope, it was exactly what you needed. Make sure you're ready to leave after lunch. Safe travels young ladies.

(DOLLY looks over at WILLOW who is still asleep.)

DOLLY

Willow?

(few beats of silence, Willow snores.)

Yay, it worked!

(WILLOW wakes up.)

WILLOW

*What* worked?

DOLLY

Oh, darn.

(DOLLY deflates. WILLOW notices the earmuffs on the intercom.)

WILLOW

What are those? Have you been up all night?

DOLLY

I finished my scarf about 3am. Then I remembered you said you barely slept the night before, so I made a yarn bomb to muffle the speaker, so you could sleep in. But that's not all!

WILLOW

You should've slept! You're going to be shattered when you get home.

DOLLY

It's okay, I'll sleep on the bus. Check this out!

(DOLLY goes to the side of the room and retrieves a large, crocheted volleyball net. She unrolls it so it is hanging across the middle of the room. Crocheted in large letters are the words 'Anyone Can Play.')

WILLOW

What is it?

DOLLY

A volleyball net. I thought we could all play in the hall now the roof's fixed.

WILLOW

Why don't we go outside?

DOLLY

But my wool...

WILLOW

-Won't drag on the ground now you've crocheted it into a scarf.

DOLLY

And it's warm too, *and* it'll fit under my rain-jacket.

WILLOW

A bit of rain won't hurt us. If I can dance on my toes 'til they're bleeding, I can go out in the rain. Irene's a 'bing bong'. The boys are already out there.

DOLLY

Okay then, will you help me?

WILLOW

Only if you're on my team.

DOLLY

I'll play on your team if you tell me your real name.

WILLOW

Fine. Its...

(WILLOW whispers her name to DOLLY.)

DOLLY

Wow. That's such a pretty name!

WILLOW

Whatever.

DOLLY

Sit with me on the bus back home? I want to see those patterns you were talking about...

WILLOW

Only 'cause I want to know how you made that muffle for the speaker. Do you want to take it with you?

DOLLY

No, leave it up. Might mean the next campers have more of a chance against 'bing bong' lady. I made these crochet flowers to take home, anyway.

WILLOW

Look at you, not following all the rules.

DOLLY

Just the important ones.

INTERCOM VOICE

(Muffled 'Bing bong' chime over speakers, muffled voice.)

It has started raining again, and young ladies should not be out in the rain. As a last hurrah, all young ladies are to meet me in the dining hall for a final inspirational lecture from a very important person, me. See you there promptly.

(DOLLY looks over at WILLOW.)

DOLLY

Wanna ditch?

WILLOW

Do I ever? We'll take the net out and see if anyone else wants to ditch too.

DOLLY

Take these first.

(DOLLY hands WILLOW two crocheted daisies.)

WILLOW

What are they for?

DOLLY

Put them in your ears.

WILLOW

To block out 'bing bong' lady!

DOLLY

Exactly.

(The sound of static from the speaker begins again as it is turned on.)

Better be quick though!

(DOLLY and WILLOW quickly put the crocheted flowers in their ears and begin to leave, carrying the net.

INTERCOM VOICE

(Muffled 'Bing bong' chime over speakers, muffled voice.)

On second thought, I decided I would broadcast my speech. It all started when I was a young girl and my mother told me that there was only one way a proper young lady should act, just like her.

(WILLOW pauses by the door. The intercom voice continues.)

WILLOW

Meet you at the stairs? I've just got to do something first.

DOLLY

Sure.

(DOLLY EXITS with the net. WILLOW waits until she is out of sight and then uses her stick as a bat, lines it up, swings at the speaker, and hits it, causing the intercom voice to become distorted and the speaker to hang off the wall.)

WILLOW

That'll give them a chance.

(WILLOW strides out and EXITS.)

INTERCOM VOICE

(Faint Muffled 'Bing bong' chime from the disembodied speaker, muffled voice.)

Ladies, what are you doing? I haven't finished my speech! Who said you could leave? (*excitedly*) You're going out to play volleyball?! But- oh, What the heck. I've always wanted to try my hand, and it says anyone can play...

(The intercom speaker fades to static, then silence.)

*The End.*

## Play V: Baking Soda and Vinegar

Baking Soda and Vinegar

A short play in 1 act

By Jessica Ramage

## CHARACTERS

Becky Strong	Vinnie's twin sister. The item she carries is baking soda.
Vinnie Strong	Becky's twin brother. The item he carries is vinegar.
Irene Steele	A rusted older woman who is the organizer of the camp.

## SETTING

A bus terminal, bus interior, camp and camp office.

## TIME

Early morning, school holidays. A parallel universe where people can see the things (pressures/ worries/ influences/ baggage) they carry around with them, which take the form of large cumbersome items unique to each person.

## PRODUCTION NOTES

These are simply suggestions, so the production team doesn't feel overwhelmed by the absurd prop aspects, feel free to ignore.

Becky's clouds can be made from pillow stuffing (eg: dacron) attached to her costume, and they can be pre-loaded with non-toxic powder (eg: talcum powder) so they create powder plumes when struck.

The 'bus' could be created in the aisle, so the audience feels like they are also passengers. It also directs focus away from the main stage, allowing for a minimal set change when they arrive at the 'camp' setting. Using moveable benches also helps to create quick changes between settings while the characters are on stage, allowing the characters to transition quickly from the dining hall to the court scene later on.

SCENE ONE

(A dimly lit waiting space at a bus terminal. A single light shines on a series of benches. BECKY and VINNIE enter together, each carrying heavy suitcases and wearing backpacks. VINNIE is wearing a cap and a large zip down hoodie (hiding something bulky underneath it). Becky has several clouds that stick close to her and sometimes release a fine snow-like powder. Suddenly, VINNIE reaches into BECKY's backpack and takes out a bag of cookies, running over to the bench with them. BECKY chases him.)

BECKY

Mind your own damn business, Vinnie!

(BECKY lunges for the cookies, but Vinnie jumps on the bench and holds them out of her reach, dangling them playfully.)

VINNIE

But Mum didn't pack *me* any snacks for the trip.

BECKY

Mum didn't pack me any snacks either, I baked these myself. I spent all my pocket money on ingredients.

(BECKY digs VINNIE in the side, causing him to drop the cookies. She snatches them back and hides them away in her backpack again, doing up the zipper deliberately.)

VINNIE

Ow!

(VINNIE begins rubbing his side.)

Why wouldn't you bake any snacks for me? We're *both* going on this trip.

BECKY

(teasing)

Because if I gave them to you now, there wouldn't be any left for the trip! I'll share them with you when the bus comes.

VINNIE

(realising his hand is wet)

You got one of my bottles, Becky. Now all my clothes are going to smell!

(VINNIE takes out a can of body spray and begins dousing himself exaggeratedly. BECKY recoils.)

BECKY

Cut it out, Vinnie! I'm going to a girls' camp; do you really think I want to smell like *boy*?

VINNIE

Smells aren't gendered, you nitwit! Anyway, do you think I want to smell like *vinegar*? No one would've known if you hadn't done that. It's all through my bag.

BECKY

(Sarcastically)

Sure, no one would've known.

(BECKY reaches over and unzips his hoodie to reveal several bottles of vinegar secured around his torso.)

VINNIE

Hey! What'd you do that for? Someone could have seen.

(VINNIE hurriedly does his hoodie zipper back up.)

BECKY

I don't know why you're trying so hard to hide your vinegar. Everyone has something they have to carry around.

VINNIE

If I had your clouds, I wouldn't hide them. I'm sure everyone wants magical clouds that follow them around and release baking soda everywhere.

(VINNIE playfully taps one of her clouds, releasing a light flurry of baking soda. He stares at his hand afterwards.)

Why couldn't I have a personal baking powder snowstorm? We're twins, after all. But no, I got stuck with stinky old vinegar.

BECKY

There's bad and there's good. Sometimes the baking soda makes me sneeze and then clouds of it go everywhere! But it *is* nice to be able to bake things with Sue and Florence, and Clara.

VINNIE

You mean Eggy-Sue, Flour-ence and Clara the cow?

BECKY

Don't call them that! They're my best friends.

VINNIE

They deserve those nicknames. You *do* know they call you Becky-home-ecky behind your back?

BECKY

Shut up, Vinnie! You're lying. I know you just made that up cause you don't like them. You never like any of my friends, and I hate those nicknames. Come on, that's our bus.

VINNIE

Hold on, Becky.

(BECKY begins to gather her bags. VINNIE dawdles, adjusting his hoodie over his bottles and dousing himself in body-spray one more time.)

BECKY

Hurry up, Vinnie! Everyone's boarding. We're going to miss it! Mum'll lose it if we don't even make it on the bus. You know how hard she scraped and saved to send us to camp.

(BECKY sighs exasperatedly and begins gathering VINNIE's bags as well as her own.)

VINNIE

I can do it!

(VINNIE snatches his bags back off BECKY and they both board the bus.)

BECKY

Look what you've done now. There're only two seats left. Ugh! I don't want to sit next to you the whole trip!

VINNIE

Like *I* want to sit next *you*.

BECKY

You're so annoying! You *know* Mum told us we have to get along or she'll keep sending us back to this camp, Vinnie!

(They sit side by side in silence, the sound of the bus engine starting up can be heard. VINNIE shuffles in his seat, then breaks the silence.)

VINNIE

I don't like nicknames either. You think I like being called Vinnie? Everyone thinks it's short for vinegar.

BECKY

Should I call you Vincent, then?

VINNIE

No. I thought I was getting away from Mum's nagging on this trip, but you sound just like her.

(Imitating their mother.)

"Vincent Strong, you've stunk out the house with your vinegar again! Go open the windows."

BECKY

I do not sound like her.

VINNIE

Do so. You sound so much like her, I should get you to ring me in sick to school sometime.

BECKY

You're so rude. I wish my friends were here. Clara's going to be mad that I'm not hanging out with them for the summer. They're going to Sue's parents' beach-house.

VINNIE

You mean the Cookie-Monsters? They're not your friends.

BECKY

Are so. You're just jealous 'cause they'd never invite you.

VINNIE

They probably only invited you because they knew you couldn't go. Mum booked us on this camp months ago, and you've been complaining about it ever since. Think about it.

BECKY

Shut up, Vinnie!

VINNIE

(shuffling his feet.)

Do you know *anyone* going on this camp?

BECKY

No. And I wouldn't be caught dead hanging out with anyone except Clara, Florence and Sue.

VINNIE

You're the only person I know, but you'll be in the girls' camp... we'll only see each other for meals. If you hadn't spilled my vinegar, I could've made a fresh impression. Now I'm just going to be Vinnie, the kid who always smells like vinegar.

BECKY

(changing the subject)

What activities are we doing on this stupid camp, do you know?

VINNIE

(reaching into his backpack, he hands her a pamphlet)

Read for yourself.

BECKY

(reading aloud)

"New Dawns leadership camp" It says girls are going to learn to sew, cook, clean and, ugh! This isn't what I thought it was going to be!

VINNIE

Check it out - the boys are doing fighting classes, hunting, hiking and... chopping firewood? I thought this was supposed to be a holiday but that sounds like hard work.

BECKY

The brochure *I* read said this camp was going to teach us to be the women of tomorrow. I didn't think we'd be learning all the stuff women learned centuries ago. I already know how to cook! Your camp sounds way better.

VINNIE

I wouldn't mind learning to sew, or to cook. It sounds more relaxing than the boys' camp. You girls always get it easy; you wouldn't last a day on the boys' camp!

BECKY

Wanna bet? I can do anything boys can do.

VINNIE

Why don't you prove it then? Switch places with me. You go on the boys' camp, and I'll go on the girls'. I could use some down-time. We look similar enough, except your hair's too long. Here, put this on...

(VINNIE takes off his cap and gives it to BECKY, then pulls up his own hood. She puts on the cap, hiding her hair underneath.)

BECKY

Are you sure? We could get into trouble...

VINNIE

What's the worst they could do, send us home? We didn't want to come in the first place.

(The sound of engine brakes can be heard. BECKY and VINNIE both lurch forward in their seats as the bus comes to a halt.)

BECKY

(pointing out the window)

I think we're here.

(BECKY and VINNIE begin gathering their bags. They EXIT the bus together.)

## SCENE TWO

(BECKY and VINNIE enter the camp area. The benches have been moved to split the stage in two with two lines running down the middle of the stage and a table at the front. The exits are now marked with a big 'men's' sign stage left and 'women's' sign stage right. There is a sign in the middle, but it is rusted and unreadable except for the word 'camp.' BECKY and VINNIE give each other a meaningful look before crossing over and swapping sides, BECKY walks out the Men's door, VINNIE walks out the women's door. They both return immediately, having deposited their bags. IRENE ENTERS, and stands stationary. She begins to recite a poem as BECKY and VINNIE perform a series of stylized freeze-frames, depicting the activities of their respective camps as they both move upstage along the aisles created by the benches, becoming increasingly tired the further they get. VINNIE performs activities like sewing, cooking, and cleaning, while BECKY performs activities like hunting, hiking and chopping firewood in their freeze-frames.)

IRENE

What are little boys made of? Snips of snails  
And puppy-dogs' tails  
That's what little boys are made of

What are little girls made of? Sugar and spice  
And everything nice  
That's what little girls are made of

(When BECKY and VINNIE reach the front two benches, they move them around so they are facing inward towards each other with the table between them and IRENE EXITS. They both slump down onto the benches, exhausted. Busy dining hall ambience can be heard.)

VINNIE

I don't know how much more of this I can take!

BECKY

Tell me about it. I'm too tired for dinner.

VINNIE

You're never too tired for dinner! This camp is changing you.

BECKY

I know, and I'm not sure it's for the better. Turns out, when it comes to guns, I have about as much aim as you in the bathroom...which isn't very much.

VINNIE

Hey!

BECKY

I did love hiking, though! We did a track called the devils' staircase. It was two hours straight upwards, but when we got to the top, it was like a different world. I even saw the ocean, Vinnie.

VINNIE

(elbowing her)

You mean, Becky. *You're* Vinnie, remember?

BECKY

Right, sorry Becky.

VINNIE

Glad you enjoyed something. I don't think I'll ever be a fashion designer. I've got so many pinpricks from that sewing class; you could say I'm holier than thou!

(BECKY glares at VINNIE and rolls her eyes)

BECKY

I always stab myself about 5 million times before I get the stitch. You sure you don't want to swap back?

VINNIE

Shut up, Becky! I mean Vinnie. No takesies backsies

BECKY

As long as you're still having fun.

(IRENE ENTERS downstage. Her whole body is covered in rust and she moves in a very slow and deliberate way, almost like a machine that is barely managing to function. She makes her way methodically around the room, telling other benches of campers to make their way to the buffet. BECKY and VINNIE continue their conversation with no knowledge of IRENE's presence.)

VINNIE

Am I ever! The cooking lessons are the best part! I'm a natural in the kitchen.

BECKY

I love measuring ingredients and watching my baking rise in the oven.

VINNIE

For me, it's all the different smells. We made Spaghetti Bolognese. The whole kitchen started to smell good even with just onions and mince sizzling in the pan, then with the chopped basil, oregano, and thyme, it was amazing.

BECKY

Sounds delicious! Except for the meat, seeing as I'm a vegetarian.

VINNIE

That's not even the best part! There was this girl called Olive, and she showed me how to make vinaigrette for my side-salad. All I needed was olive oil and lemon, 'cause the main ingredient is vinegar. It's so nice to actually use my vinegar for something instead of always worrying about the smell.

BECKY

That's amazing! You'll be able to help with the cooking at home, now! You could invite Olive over.

(BECKY nudges VINNIE and winks suggestively.)

VINNIE

Nooooo! She thinks I'm you!

(IRENE stops, pricks up her ears and begins to make her way over to their table.)

But I'm enjoying the cooking. You and Mum always do it at home. I thought I'd be no good.

BECKY

That's what I thought about hunting. You and Dad went on all those bush-trips before he left, but you never invited me once. I didn't want to shoot at first, but it made me feel powerful, and I had a choice what I used that power for. I missed on purpose with the rabbits, but I started to find my stride when we were on the range and the targets were paper.

VINNIE

I thought you said you were no good.

BECKY

Everyone starts off as no good. It's not a reason not to keep going at something.

VINNIE

I guess you're right. See, you do so sound like Mum.

(BECKY opens her mouth to speak, but VINNIE finally notices IRENE.)

Shhh! She's coming!

(IRENE reaches BECKY and VINNIE.)

IRENE

Good evening, I see you have found the dining hall. My name is Irene Steele, and I am the creator, founder, and organiser of this camp. I am here to tell you that it's now your turn to go up and serve yourselves at the buffet. There's chicken and veggies for girls, and rabbit stew for the boys, fresh from today's hunt.

(BECKY and VINNIE both jump, finally noticing IRENE, they turn to look at her.)

IRENE

Twins, eh? You don't look much alike. The chicken is over that side, the rabbit stew is over there.

BECKY

I don't eat chicken! I'm a vegetarian!

IRENE

Well lucky for you, you've got rabbit stew. You can just pick the gristle out and eat the vegetables. Wait, which one of you is Becky?

(IRENE scrutinises them. Both BECKY and VINNIE immediately raise their hands, but VINNIE quickly kicks BECKY under the table and she lowers hers.)

VINNIE

(in his best high-pitched voice)

I'm Becky. I like chicken!

(BECKY holds in her laughter. IRENE stares at him.)

BECKY

(in a lower voice)

And I'm Vinnie.

IRENE

Excuse me? Where are your manners, boy? I am your elder, so it would be respectful to address me as Ma'am.

BECKY

(nervously clearing her throat)

Sorry, Ma'am. I'm Vinnie, Ma'am.

IRENE

(to VINNIE)

And you, young lady, cross your legs. Who said it was okay for you to wear pants? You should be in a skirt, pants are unladylike. But not too short a skirt, and you must wear tights; you know how boys are around bare skin. You mustn't tempt them. And take your elbows off the table.

VINNIE

(quietly, in his best high-pitched voice)

Excuse me, 'Maam.

IRENE

What was that? I can't hear you through that hood. It's rude to wear hats inside. Both of you, take your hats off right now.

BECKY

(startled, in her lower voice)

I can't, 'Maam. I've got...

VINNIE

(in his high-pitched voice, elbowing her to stop)

It's a funny story 'Maam. Our Mum was giving him a haircut, she was right in the swing of it, but just as she was making the final cut, she heard the end of the clippers clatter to the floor. She looked at Vinnies head and saw she'd given him-

IRENE

-A bald spot?

BECKY

(in a lower voice)

I prefer the term 'solar panel'.

IRENE

Ah yes, well you'd better cover that up then. At least you're young and it'll grow back. Enjoy your dinner, campers.

(IRENE wanders away slowly, still skeptical. When she is out of earshot VINNIE and BECKY both let out a sigh.)

VINNIE

(in a normal voice)

That was close!

BECKY

(in a normal voice)

Too close, Vinnie!

VINNIE

Shhhhh! Just eat your dinner and keep your head down.

(IRENE EXITS. BECKY looks sadly down at her bowl of rabbit stew. VINNIE notices her, slides her bowl to his side, scrapes his chicken into it and slides her back his plate of veggies. BECKY looks at him and smiles. Lights fade as they both eat their dinner.)

### SCENE THREE

(BECKY ENTERS through the Men's door, VINNIE ENTERS through the women's door. IRENE ENTERS and moves between both BECKY and VINNIE, straightening their posture, or giving suggestions on how best to perform their tasks. This time, BECKY and VINNIE recite the poem as they perform the same series of stylized freeze-frames, depicting the activities of their respective camps as they both move upstage along the aisles created by the benches.)

VINNIE

What are little girls made of? Sugar and spice  
And everything nice  
That's what little girls are made of

(As BECKY is saying her part, she begins to act as if there is a bully pushing her off balance and taunting her. She retaliates by puffing her chest and trying to step out her bully.)

BECKY

What are little boys made of? Snips of snails  
And puppy-dogs' tails...

(BECKY takes a swing at her bully, moving her fist in an exaggeratedly wide arc. She then reacts to being punched in the face by the bully, her head jerking back with enough force to make her hat fall off, causing her long hair to fall free. VINNIE looks on in horror as IRENE makes her way to BECKY.)

IRENE

This is disgraceful. Violence? Switching places?

BECKY

Ma'am, I can explain.

VINNIE

Ma'am, it was my idea. Please don't let my sister get in trouble.

BECKY

No, Vinnie, don't-

VINNIE

-For once, Becky, would you just let me look out for you?

IRENE

This is unacceptable. I ought to send you home immediately with no refund. But we do have due process here. We obey the laws of natural justice. We shall have to convene the camp court.

BECKY

The camp court?

IRENE

We do things by camp law here. Move those benches over there while I set up the proceedings.

(IRENE gestures to move three of the benches in the middle upstage. BECKY and VINNIE each take one end of a bench and begin moving them upstage. IRENE EXITS and BECKY and VINNIE finally have a chance to talk.)

VINNIE

What was that about?

BECKY

He took my axe! I was chopping wood and I went to get another log and he just took it! He said I was useless at chopping wood, so I punched him in the shoulder, I wanted to give him a dead arm. I didn't think he'd uppercut me.

VINNIE

(sighs)

Becky, I know you said you *can* do anything boys can do, but that doesn't mean you should. Mum says we have to make our own choices.

BECKY

I was just trying to be a boy! I was trying to be you!

VINNIE

If you were trying to be me, you'd know I never throw the first punch.

BECKY

Those boys at school must really bother you, huh.

VINNIE

Yeah, they do. But I'm supposed to just man up and take it.

BECKY

No, you're not.

VINNIE

Yeah, I'm supposed to bottle it up until it's too much and I do end up throwing a punch.

BECKY

You shouldn't throw the first punch, but you also shouldn't have to bottle things up. You should talk to me more, Vin.

VINNIE

I don't want to bottle things up, it's just... it's hard.

BECKY

I know. We make our own choices though.

VINNIE

Yes, mum.

(IRENE ENTERS with a large stack of papers, a megaphone and her gavel and takes her place behind the middle bench. She directs BECKY and VINNIE to the benches on either side with a sharp nod of her head and trudge to their benches like prisoners to the execution. They stand, waiting for IRENE to commence proceedings.)

IRENE

(into her megaphone)

Becky and Vinnie Strong, you are both to be held in contempt before the camp court. All rise for the honorable judge presiding, myself, Irene Steele.

(IRENE gestures for the audience to stand up.)

You, the jury, may all be seated.

(IRENE gestures for the audience to sit down.)

The honorable judge calls on the prosecutor to explain why these two young people stand accused. *(beat.)* Oh! That's me.

BECKY

But you can't be the prosecutor, you're already the judge!

IRENE

(banging her gavel.)

Objection overruled! I will be the judge and the prosecution. I am the creator, founder, and organizer of this camp; I am in charge! Now, members of the court, I will proceed to explain why Miss Strong and Master Strong stand accused. You were both sent to this camp by your mother to learn to get along, am I correct?

BECKY AND VINNIE

(together)

Yes.

IRENE

I remember your mother from the phone call, frazzled woman. Wanted to set up an automatic payment before the enrolments were even open. She sounded like she was at her wits' end. Before you arrived at this camp, you both made the decision to switch places. Becky, you attended the boys' camp in place of your twin brother, am I correct?

BECKY

(nodding dejectedly)

Yes.

IRENE

And you, Vinnie, attended the girls' camp in place of your twin sister, am I correct?

VINNIE

Yes.

IRENE

And what, may I ask, was the purpose of this deception?

BECKY

We weren't trying to deceive anyone, I just wanted to prove I can do anything boys could do.

VINNIE

It was my idea, I wanted to take it easy, and the girls' camp sounded like a breeze compared to the boys' camp. I tricked my sister into swapping places.

BECKY

No, Vinnie. We both came up with the idea, but I don't think we should be punished for it. We didn't hurt anyone.

IRENE

You have both lied. We teach boys how to be young men here, and girls how to be young women. What are we going to do if they switch places? Teach girls to be young men and boys to be young women? It's absurd! There are rules!

BECKY

Respectfully, Ma'am, we both really liked the other camps. Your brochure said that you teach young women to be the women of tomorrow, but how can we learn and grow when all you're teaching us is how to be "good" wives and husbands? Why can't we just learn to be good people?

VINNIE

What if I don't want to get married? What if I don't want a wife? What then? I'm pretty sure I'll still need to make meals every day, so why can't I learn to cook? Girls don't have a monopoly on cooking, cleaning, or sewing.

BECKY

And boys aren't the only ones who can hunt, hike, or chop firewood. What's wrong with us learning new skills?

IRENE

Ridiculous! Men are better at physical activities, everyone knows that. Why should a woman learn how to hunt when it's a man's job to bring home the bounty and provide for his family?

BECKY

We don't have to hunt our meals anymore, 'Maam, most people go to a supermarket; and anyway, I'm a *vegetarian*. Plus, there were heaps of things I liked doing on the boys' camp, hunting just wasn't one of them.

IRENE

But boys and girls are different, how could they ever be interested in the same things?

VINNIE

Becky and I both love cooking! I never would have known that if I didn't sneak into the other camp.

IRENE

(To VINNIE)

To think I was telling you to wear a skirt at dinner last night. How disgraceful!

(To BECKY)

And you, why are you wearing pants, not a skirt? It's improper!

BECKY

Pants are more practical.

IRENE

Don't you have to wear a skirt for your school uniform?

BECKY

Actually, we can wear pants now. After my friend's big sister crashed her bike riding to school in her skirt, a group of students petitioned the principal and got the uniform changed.

IRENE

But don't you want to look neat and professional?

BECKY

I'd rather go hiking in pants, thanks. Less chafing.

VINNIE

It's not fair! Us boys get told we've got to play 'shirts or skins' on the sports field, but my friend Rain got sent home because she was showing her shoulders on mufti day. It was Summer!

BECKY

Stuff like that makes us think you value our appearance over our education.

IRENE

Well, aren't you two just a little fountain of fantasy factoids. The type of world you're describing sounds awfully hard to believe; there are expectations of what a young man or a young woman should be! How they should dress! How they should act! This is the world and you have to learn how to conform!

BECKY

No it's not. The world is changing. Gender is a problem for everyone. Why do we need to put limits on ourselves? Can't we work out our strengths first?

VINNIE

This camp needs to move with the times, our generation is preparing for the future not the past.

BECKY

We understand more than you give us credit for.

IRENE

(banging her gavel)

Order in the court! Your ideas require far too much change. Far too much work! I will not listen to you anymore. I have reached my verdict. You will be sent home on the next bus before you can spread any more of your ludicrous ideas. We do not need change, we need definition, stability, immovability. None of this fluid, non-exclusive nonsense. I am writing up my verdict right now.

VINNIE

(dejectedly to BECKY, as IRENE finds a pen and begins to write)

Do you think she'd let me say goodbye to Olive?

BECKY

(to VINNIE, fervently)

What are you talking about? We can't give up. We can't let her send us home! There has to be something we can do.

VINNIE

(to BECKY)

I have an idea, but it might get us in more trouble.

BECKY

(to VINNIE)

We're already being sent home, what else can she do?

(IRENE is checking her paperwork and writing. VINNIE whispers his plan into BECKY's ear. She looks at him confused. He taps her cloud, releasing a dusting of baking soda, he pours some of his vinegar where the baking soda fell and they both watch as it fizzes. VINNIE looks questioningly at BECKY and she nods.)

IRENE

I can hear you two whispering. What are you doing over there?

(VINNIE and BECKY both turn back to face IRENE)

BECKY AND VINNIE

(together)

One, two... three!

BECKY

(sneezes loudly)

Achoo!

(Baking Soda erupts from BECKY's clouds, covering the whole room, including IRENE.)

IRENE

What are you kids doing? You can't do this; this is destruction of property! Your mother will be charged for this!

(VINNIE hands a bottle of vinegar to BECKY, while opening one himself and they begin shaking the vinegar everywhere. It fizzes, creating a reaction that gets rid of the rust off Irene, and also reveals the rusted sign at the back which reads, “Camp Empowerment – A camp for all sorts of young people.”)

My rust... it’s gone, I can move again! How did you do that?

VINNIE

A little something I learned while I was at the girls’ camp. In cleaning class, I learned that the reaction me and Becky create together with our baking soda and vinegar can actually be used to clean all kinds of things, but most importantly, it dissolves rust.

BECKY

It looks like your rust wasn’t the only thing that dissolved, look at the sign.

IRENE

(reading)

“Camp Empowerment – A camp for all sorts of young people.” My son must have done that before he left.

VINNIE

He’s right. This camp should be for everyone. Gender isn’t a binary, it can’t be split neatly in two, it’s a spectrum. You can’t separate it, and you can’t always label it. We’re people before we’re bodies.

BECKY

And someone’s physical sex doesn’t always line up with their gender.

VINNIE

Just because society says we should like certain things, doesn’t always mean it resonates with us. We might just like something different. That’s what our mum always says.

BECKY

All we’re trying to say is that everyone has equal value, we just have different abilities, strengths, and interests.

VINNIE

I love cooking, but it’s only at the girls’ camp. Do you think I should be held back from doing something I love, just because my interests fall outside a certain box? Should I be held back from doing something my sister likes too?

IRENE

No. You're both right. I thought you were rebelling against this camp, taking the mickey, but you were rebelling against the division. I didn't know that you actually *wanted* to learn from each other.

VINNIE

People are more likely to judge things they don't understand, so if we stop closing things off, maybe we can help each other learn.

IRENE

Well, I must say your mother will be relieved you're finally getting along. Even if it's only getting up to mischief.

BECKY

So you'll open up the camps? No more gendered classes?

IRENE

I think it's the least I can do. You've both proven that there's value in learning all kinds of skills, but besides that, there's even more value in learning from each other.

VINNIE

(excitedly)

So when are you going to tell the others? They're all out on the field, you could go tell them now.

IRENE

I don't know; it's been a long time since I went outside.

BECKY

How about we all go and tell them, together?

IRENE

Okay, if you're sure.

(BECKY and VINNIE take IRENE's hands and they begin to EXIT together. Suddenly VINNIE stops and turns to IRENE, addressing her.)

VINNIE

Wait, we're not still expelled, are we?

IRENE

Oh, I'd almost forgotten.

BECKY

(rolling her eyes)

Vinnie!

IRENE

Well, I suppose since we have decided to open up the camps, neither of you technically did anything wrong by switching places.

VINNIE

Yahoo! We're going to rule the cleaning class.

BECKY

I know! It's so cool how your vinegar works with my baking soda to get rid of rust!

VINNIE

I wonder what else we can do together?

BECKY

I don't know, but I can't wait to find out!

(BECKY, VINNIE and IRENE EXIT together.)

*The End.*

## APPENDIX A: Ethics Information Sheet

Below is the information sheet which was made available to all prospective participants for the high-school drama experiences survey.

### **Feminist Role Models in High School Theatre: A Critical and Creative Response**

#### INFORMATION SHEET

Kia ora, my name is Jessica Ramage, and I am a postgraduate student studying towards a Master of Creative Writing at Massey University, specialising in playwriting. I received my Bachelor of Arts in 2020, with a major in English and a minor in Theatre Studies. Currently, I am working towards completing a critical and creative thesis that explores feminist role models in high school theatre and examines how plays written for performance in high school can create more positive and empowering situations for their characters on stage and benefit the students performing them.

#### **Project Description and Invitation**

As part of my thesis, I am analysing feminist role models in high school theatre, aiming to contribute more positive, empowering and confidence-building characters and situations in high school theatre with my critical and creative response. While I believe that theatre has immense potential for students to learn positive lessons from the characters they play onstage, I found through my own experiences of high school theatre that many of the subject matter, themes, and situations within the plays we studied and performed were of a heavier, more mature nature and didn't create empowering situations for the characters within them or the actors playing them. I am interested in whether there is an opportunity to provide more developed, positive, gender-inclusive roles within plays commonly used for high school performance and how any collected anecdotes might support or disprove this idea. I am also interested in identifying some of the effects playing certain kinds of roles may have had for some students.

As part of the critical section of my thesis, I would like to include anonymised experiences from approx. ten other people who have previously been part of a high school drama program. If you are interested in participating, I can either conduct a face to face or Zoom interview with you or, if you prefer to participate online, I have set up a semi-structured anonymous questionnaire here [<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/YD35VQ5>]. The interview or questionnaire consists of ten questions and should take approximately 10 to 30 minutes to complete, depending on the level of detail you wish to provide. If participating by interview, the interview will be recorded, answers transcribed, and you will have the opportunity to check the transcript for accuracy.

I will use any answers provided in interviews or questionnaire responses to expand and compare with my own experiences of high school drama, to provide a more well-rounded view of the high school

drama experience. All responses will be anonymised to ensure none of the respondents, their schools, or their former teachers, can be identified.

As I am interested in how people reflect on their high school experiences with the benefit of some distance and maturity, and when they are no longer in a power relationship with their high school drama teacher, to participate in this research you must be over the age of 18 and no longer attending high school.

If you meet these requirements and have any anecdotes or from your high school drama experience that you would be willing to share, then I would love to hear from you and I invite you to participate in the research.

The collection of this data will be for the sole purpose of supporting my research as part of the Massey Master of Creative Writing qualification and will not be used beyond that. All people, schools and institutions will be anonymised. Raw data will not be shared with anyone except myself the researcher, you as an individual participant if needed to check your transcript, and my academic supervisor. The data will be stored on my password-protected laptop and no printed copies will be made. If you would like to receive either a short summary of the findings or a full copy of the thesis at the end of the research (end of 2022), you will be able to request this during the interview or questionnaire.

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- decline to answer any particular question;
- withdraw from the study even after completing an interview or questionnaire by advising the researcher before October 2022;
- ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;
- provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used;
- be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded;
- ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview.

If you choose to fill out the anonymous questionnaire, please note that:

- Completion and return of the online questionnaire implies consent. You have the right to decline to answer any particular question.

If for any reason remembering or sharing anecdotes from high school drama class causes you any discomfort, you will be able to immediately stop answering questions and you should free-call or text 1737 any time to talk to a trained counsellor.

Please feel free to contact me, or my supervisor, if you have any questions about the project

Researcher: Jessica Ramage

Massey Manawatū Campus

[Contact details removed]

Supervisor: Associate Professor Elspeth Tilley

Massey Wellington Campus

[Contact details removed]

#### LOW RISK NOTIFICATION

This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher named above is responsible for the ethical conduct of this research. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you wish to raise with someone other than the researcher or supervisor, please contact Prof Craig Johnson, Director, Research Ethics, telephone 06 356 9099 x 85271, email [humanethics@massey.ac.nz](mailto:humanethics@massey.ac.nz)

## APPENDIX B: Chords for Wiremu's Hedgehog Song

CAPO: 2<sup>nd</sup> Fret

Sung to the tune of the verse in Suzanne Vega's "The Queen and the Soldier."

*(soft finger picking instrumental on chords Am, C, Am)*

Kia Ora, everyone. As you probably already know, I'm Wiremu.

Today I'm going to tell you a little story about a hedgehog.

Now, this little hedgehog he just wanted to have friends.

*Am (single strum)*

Am                    Am                    F                    F

The hedgehog was longing for some friends to hug

C                    G                    C                    G

But every time he went in, they all threw their hands up,

Am                    Am                    F                    F

And said, "We are not ones to be all tight and smug,

C                    G                    C

But we don't like bein' stabbed by your quills."

Am                    Am                    F                    F

The hedgehog, he left with a tear in his eye,

C                    G                    C                    G

He cursed at his quills, and he asked, "God why,

Am                    Am                    F                    F

Was I given this body people don't want to hug,

C G C

All I want is a friend I can love.”

Am Am F F

So the hedgehog went home and he told his brother Bill,

C G C G

He said, “All my friends hate me, because of my quills,

Am Am F F

They say they are too spiky for anyone to hug,

C G C

All I want is someone to be my bud.”

Am Am F F

So his brother Bill took him in his arms and said, “Hey,

C G C G

You’re worth more to me than anyone ever could say,

Am Am F F

And if anyone tells you different, you just turn away,

C G C

And say my quills are what makes me who I am.”

Am Am F F

The very next day, when the hedgehog went to school,

C G C G

He saw his friends, they said “we were not very cool”,

Am Am F F  
We got you this present, now don't be a fool,  
C G C  
Open it up and see what's inside."

Am Am F F  
The hedgehog, he opened it then his smile fell through the floor,  
C G C G  
He said, "These are just pellets, it's empty, what for?"

Am Am F F  
And his friends, they felt his hurt, deep at their core,  
C G C  
As they put the packing pellets onto his quills.

Am Am F F  
Then his friends took the hedgehog in a warm embrace,  
C G C G  
And all doubts about their friendship vanished without a trace,

Am Am F F  
They said, "We love you with your quills and we are willing to change."  
C G C  
And the Hedgehog, he felt happy inside.

C G C  
And the Hedgehog, he felt happy inside.

# APPENDIX C: Sheet Music for Sunny's Angry Song

## Sunny's Angry Song

Jessica Ramage

G F G F G F G

I'm tired of look-ing on the bright side,

8 F G F G F

hop-ing I could see right through all the com - ments that you spe-ew.

13 G F G F G

I'm tired of put-ing on a bright smile, hop-ing I'd be fine while

18 F G F G F G F

they all tuned me out. Well I'm not fine, no not this time.

25 G F G F G F

I tried to put it in to words so you can see, I'm an - gry!

31 G F G F G F G

The words I hear I let 'em slide right by, but frank ly, I'm ang - ry!

# Sunny's Angry Song 2

Jessica Ramage

A E A G

I'm get ting real tired of looking on the

10 D E A G

bright side, tryin' a let my feel ings slide. Do they e-ven care how I

18 D G F G F

feel in - side? Well I tell 'em I'm an - gry!

26 G F G F G

Now I'm on - ly look-ing on the bright side when I think the time's right

31 F G F G F

to. Gon-nashine my light when I choose. No more put-ing on a

36 G F G F G F

fake smile, now I know it takes time to be your - self, let your feel-ings be

42 G F G F G F G

tru-ue I tried to put it in to words so you can

49 F G F G

see, I'm fi - nal ly fre - ee! Yeah!