



# Saplings

**Creative Learning**  
Teacher Resource



# SAPLINGS

## Overview of curriculum links and performance themes

- **Subjects:** Aboriginal Studies, Drama, English, History, Music
- **General Capabilities and Cross-Curriculum Priorities:** Literacy, Critical and Creative Thinking, Ethical Understanding, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures, Personal and Social Capability
- **Age Group:** Stages 5–6 (Years 9–12)
- **Genre:** Contemporary Australian drama using realism and vignette-style storytelling, drawing on verbatim and poetic elements to explore youth justice
- **Themes:** Identity and belonging, systemic inequality, justice and resistance, cultural storytelling, family and survival, small acts with big consequences

The following resources from the [NSW Department of Education](#) are a useful companion to this resource:

- Sample Unit: Drama Stage 5 – Year 9 (Listening to Blak Voices)
- Years 7-10 Working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content

Teachers are also encouraged to use *Saplings* in conjunction with study of prescribed texts in Stage 6 Drama for core and elective units of study in Australian Drama and Theatre, Studies in Drama and Theatre, and Verbatim Theatre.

## Performance Overview

*Saplings* presents a series of short, interwoven scenes—performed by a cast of four actors—that capture the voices and experiences of young people navigating Australia’s youth justice system.

With minimal sets and everyday props, the show blends realism, poetic storytelling, and gritty humour to bring complex truths to life. One moment you're in a courtroom, the next on a street corner or inside a detention centre—all revealed through sharp dialogue, music, and shifting character roles.

Guided by strong performances and a hip-hop-infused soundtrack created by incarcerated youth, *Saplings* challenges students to consider the realities of systemic inequality, family breakdown, and identity in a way that is both raw and deeply human.

This bold and thought-provoking production invites students to reflect on justice, empathy, and the stories that often go unheard – how these issues affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth disproportionately - reminding us of the power of theatre to confront, connect, and create change.

# What to expect in the performance

Through short scenes (vignettes), four actors bring to life a range of characters and situations, blending humour, emotion, and truth. The performance includes live acting, original music, and striking visual moments designed to spark reflection and discussion.

## – **Lighting:**

- Lighting shifts help show changes in mood, time, and setting.
- Some scenes may be dimly lit to reflect isolation or night-time.
- Sudden changes in lighting may occur between scenes.

## – **Seating:**

- Students will sit in a standard theatre layout with rows of chairs.
- There is no audience participation required during the show.

## – **Music and Sound:**

- The show features a soundtrack of hip-hop and rap created by young people in the youth justice system.
- Some scenes include silence, loud dialogue, or overlapping voices.
- The sound is expressive but not designed to startle.

## – **Performance:**

- Four actors perform a range of roles across different short scenes.
- Scenes include moments of humour, tension, and deep emotion.
- Language includes slang and strong emotions through. There may also be course language.
- The actors may change characters quickly, showing different perspectives and stories.

## – **Interaction:**

- The audience is not asked to participate, but students are welcome to respond emotionally—through laughter, stillness, or reflection.
- The performance is designed to be thought-provoking and inclusive.

## – **Post-Show Experience:**

- Teachers may choose to lead a classroom discussion or calming activity after the show.
- Students are encouraged to reflect, write, or talk about how the performance made them feel.

# The Australian Theatre for Young People

## Company overview

ATYP is Australia's flagship youth theatre company, championing young voices through productions, training and creative programs across the country. ATYP empower young people to shape the future of Australian storytelling.

ATYP champion's youth voice on stage and behind the scenes, creating pathways for young artists, writers and performers to develop their craft, connect with industry and share stories that reflect the world they live in today.

ATYP's work is built on three pillars:

1. **Productions:** Award-winning new Australian plays and musicals created with, by and for young people. ATYP's productions bring the voice of young Australia to our stages, whilst creating opportunities for artists to make their professional debuts.
2. **Classes & Workshops:** Australia's largest drama workshop program for young people. From weekly classes and holiday programs to in-school residencies and Intersection Festival, our Learning Program builds skills, confidence and creativity in the next generation.
3. **Writing & Artist Programs:** Each year, more than 40 emerging artists are mentored through ATYP's writing and artist development programs to create over 50 new plays and performance works. Initiatives like Fresh Ink, National Studio, Peer 2 Pier and Industry Crash Course support young creatives to develop their practice, form networks and step into the wider arts industry.

# Glossary

- **Bail:** A rule that lets a person stay out of jail while they wait for their court date.
- **Youth Justice System:** The part of the law that deals with young people (usually aged 10–17) who might need community supervision and support, with detention being a last resort
- **Incarceration:** Being locked up in prison or detention.
- **Verbatim Theatre:** A type of play where the script uses real words from real interviews and stories.
- **Systemic Disadvantage:** When groups of people are treated unfairly over time because of how society is set up.
- **Over-representation:** When one group shows up more often than others in a system.
- **Colloquial Language:** Everyday speech or slang that people use when they talk casually.
- **Vignette:** A short scene or moment in a play that shows an idea or story.
- **Resilience:** The strength to keep going and bounce back, even when life is hard.
- **Cultural Storytelling:** Sharing stories that come from your culture and help teach, remember, or celebrate it.
- **Justice:** Fairness. In this play, it asks: is the system fair for everyone?
- **Powerlessness:** Feeling like you don't have control over what happens to you.
- **Rehabilitation:** Helping someone change their path and make better choices after getting in trouble.

# Activities for the classroom



# Pre- and post-show activities – English

## **Contextual Research - The Justice System and Youth:**

Have students explore the question, "What are the social factors that shape young people's experiences with the law?" by conducting research the structure of the youth justice system in NSW. In small groups, present key findings about:

- Bail conditions
- Detention statistics
- Over-representation of Aboriginal youth

**Creative Writing: Small Moments, Big Stakes:** Based on the prompt, "Would you risk breaking bail for a packet of Mi Goreng?", ask students to write a short monologue or narrative piece that explores how an ordinary decision can carry extraordinary consequences.

**Discussion: Whose Stories Get Told?** Facilitate a class discussion around representation in media. Who gets to tell stories about incarceration and justice? Who is left out of the conversation? What role do artists, especially First Nations playwrights, have in shaping public understanding?

## **Response Essay: Personal vs Systemic Responsibility**

Have students write a response to the question: "How does *Saplings* challenge the audience to rethink ideas around blame and responsibility?" Encourage students to draw on both character experiences and societal context.

## **Textual Analysis: Voice and Tone in Monologues:**

Have students choose a monologue from the show and analyse how voice, tone, and figurative language reveal the speaker's inner world. Focus on colloquial language, rhythm, and shifts in mood.

**Reflective Letter Writing:** Have students write a letter to one of the characters in *Saplings* – e.g. Yani, Lachlan or Kai. They might offer support, ask questions, or share how their story affected them.

# Pre- and post-show activities – Drama

## **Introduction to Realism and Verbatim Theatre:**

Introduce key conventions of realism and verbatim theatre. Watch clips or read excerpts from other examples (e.g. Parramatta Girls, The Laramie Project) and have students conduct research on verbatim theatre before reflecting in their logbooks with the prompt – "How do these styles build empathy in the audience?"

## **Character Exploration – Physicalising Powerlessness**

In pairs, students explore different body language postures to express waiting, tension, shame, or frustration. Use these to stage a scene set in a waiting room, courtroom, or prison.

## **Exploring Aboriginal Playwrights and Contemporary Theatre**

Introduce Hannah Belanzky's work. Have students compare themes and techniques with other Aboriginal playwrights (e.g. Wesley Enoch, Leah Purcell). "How do these practitioners use theatre as cultural storytelling and advocacy?"

## **Devising Vignettes from Local Voices**

In groups, students create a short scene inspired by a real issue affecting young people in their community (e.g. housing insecurity, racism, school exclusion). Use vignette structure and realism.

## **Performing Contrasts – Humour and Tragedy**

Have students choose a scene from Saplings that shifts from comic to serious. Students rehearse and perform it, focusing on emotional shifts and physical transitions.

## **Soundtrack and Staging**

Have students choose one vignette and design a soundscape and minimal set that enhances the mood and message. Include music choices, lighting ideas, and set sketch with rationale.

### *Prescribed texts to reference:*

- Enoch W and Mailman D (2019) *The 7 Stages of Grieving*, 25th Anniversary edn, Playlab Press, Brisbane.
- Harrison J (2021) *The Visitors*, Currency Press, Sydney.

# Pre- and post-show activities – Aboriginal Studies

**Consider the following questions as short answer responses, essay questions, or conversation starters for group discussion**

- Discuss the importance of oral traditions for Aboriginal Peoples.
- How does *Saplings* continue this tradition of storytelling in a creative and performative context?
- What would be some of the positive effects and outcomes of young people seeing these stories told on stage?
- How do you think ATYP and the creatives of *Saplings* used ethical research methods and consultation protocols to present stories in this performance?
- How can *Saplings* be seen as activism or advocating for Aboriginal rights and self-determination?

# Pre- and post-show activities – Music

**List the ways sound design and music has been used in *Saplings*.** Consider how this affects scenes, characters, and the overall mood of the performance.

**Research sound design for theatre, you might like to consider other performances you have been to.**

- What impact does music and sound design have on performance?
- What is the difference between sound design for theatre and musical theatre?
- How would the audience's experience of *Saplings* change if the music were performed live, as opposed to pre-recorded?
- How might directors, actors, writers, musicians, technicians, and designers collaborate to develop music and sound design for a theatrical production?

# Curriculum links



# Curriculum Links

## Connecting with the classroom

### English

- **Stage 5**
  - EN5-URB-01** evaluates how texts represent ideas and experiences, and how they can affirm or challenge values and attitudes
  - EN5-URC-01** investigates and explains ways of valuing texts and the relationships between them
- **Stage 6**
  - EST-11-01** analyses the ways an author's choice of language, form and structure shape meaning in texts of different modes and mediums
  - EST-11-02** explains the relationships between texts through context, form and language
  - EST-11-03** explains the ways context and values influence composition and audience response
  - EST-12-01** critically analyses the ways an author's choice of language, form and structure shapes meaning in complex texts of different modes and mediums
  - EST-12-02** explains the relationships between texts through context, form and language
  - EST-12-03** analyses the ways context and values influence composition and audience response

### History

- **HI5-CPP-01** accounts for different contexts and perspectives of the past
- **HI5-APP-01** explains Aboriginal Peoples' experiences and perspectives related to their struggle for rights and freedoms
- **HI5-SOU-01** integrates evidence from sources to develop historical accounts, explanations and arguments about the past
- **HI5-INQ-01** assesses the value and limitations of sources as part of a historical inquiry

# Curriculum Links

## Connecting with the classroom

### Drama

- **Stage 5:**  
**DR5-APP-01** analyses how creative choices shape intention and meaning through dramatic processes
- **DR5-APP-02** evaluates how dramatic elements are manipulated to influence audience response through dramatic contexts
- **Stage 6:**  
**P3.1** critically appraises and evaluates, both orally and in writing, personal performances and the performances of others  
**P3.2** understands the variety of influences that have impacted upon drama and theatre performance styles, structures and techniques  
**H3.1:** Applies understanding of cultural, historical and political contexts  
**H3.5** appreciates the role of the audience in various dramatic and theatrical styles and movements

### Aboriginal Studies

- **AST5-IDE-02** explains ways in which Aboriginal Peoples maintain and celebrate identity
- **AST5-FCA-01** explains the roles and importance of families and Communities for Aboriginal Peoples
- **AST5-SAA-01** explains the importance of self-determination and autonomy for Aboriginal Peoples
- **AST5-REL-01** explains factors that influence perceptions of Aboriginal Peoples and the range of relationships between Aboriginal Peoples and non-Aboriginal people
- **AST5-DAT-01** applies appropriate Community consultation protocols and ethical research practices to gather, protect and interpret data
- **AST5-INF-01** selects and uses a range of research methodologies and technologies to locate, select, organise and share information and findings

# Curriculum Links

## Connecting with the classroom

### Music

- **MU5-LIS-01** uses listening skills to analyse music in relation to stylistic, cultural, historical and social contexts
- **MU5-LIS-02** uses listening skills to evaluate how the elements of music are manipulated and combined
- **MU5-COM-01** improvises, arranges or composes with stylistic understanding and musical expression
- **MU5-COM-02** manipulates and combines the elements of music to create musical ideas

### Music 1 Year 11

- **MU1-11L-01** describes the ways Music context and Music language shape music
- **MU1-11L-02** uses aural skills to identify and describe features of music
- **MU1-11C-02** applies Music context and Music language to realise musical intent in composition

### Music 1 Year 12

- **MU1-12L-01** analyses the ways Music context and Music language shape music
- **MU1-12L-02** uses aural skills to analyse features of music
- **MU1-12C-01** uses Compositional language to compose with stylistic understanding
- **MU1-12C-02** applies Music context and Music language to realise musical intent in original composition

## Get in touch

Got questions? Contact us with any enquiries about our education programs for schools via phone or email.

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