



Saplings

Creative Learning
Teacher Resource

AT YP



SAPLINGS

Overview of NSW 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 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
- **Stage 6 Drama NSW topics for study:** Australian Drama and Theatre; Studies in Drama and Theatre

Please use this resource in conjunction with other supporting documents like:

- [Playbuilding with Aboriginal Pedagogies](#)
- [Teaching First Nations Content – Australian Plays Transform](#)
- [Drama 7–10 Syllabus \(2023\) - Teaching and learning support | NSW Curriculum | NSW Education Standards Authority \(working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content, and sample unit Blak Voices\)](#)
- ATYP and Art Centre Melbourne Saplings Learning Resource

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 production blends a range of theatrical styles/dramatic forms including realism, poetic storytelling, and gritty humour to bring complex truths to life. One moment you are in a courtroom, the next on a street corner or inside a detention centre—all revealed through The dialogue, music, lighting, space, and transformation of characters by the performers.

A hip-hop infused soundtrack created by young people who have experienced the justice system, and strong performances by the ensemble cast, *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 engage with empathy for those who have encountered the justice system, and whose stories have gone 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 designed to support the story and performances but not 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 contemporary slang, strong emotions, with moments of coarse 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 share perspectives young people may relate to.

– **Post-Show Experience:**

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

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 script 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: 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 freeze frames (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 Belanszky'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 an issue they have noticed that is important to young people in their community or school (e.g. housing insecurity, racism, school exclusion, AI and social media). 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

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.
 - You might like to research songlines, yarning circles and storytelling, the diversity of First Nations languages, performances (like dance, theatre, and songs), as well as recordings and video.
 - Discuss their purpose, medium and formats, and how they compare to each other or when/where they might be used.
- How does Saplings continue this tradition of storytelling in a creative and performative context?
 - Start by researching plays such as 7 Stages of Grieving (Wesley Enoch and Deborah Mailman), The Visitors (Jane Harrison); stories from writers like Stradbroke Dreamtime (Oodgeroo Noonuccal), Bruce Pascoe, Stan Grant, Anita Heiss, Melissa Lucashenko; poetry from Jazz Money, Evelyn Araluen; dance theatre by Bangarra Dance Theatre and Marrugeku.
 - This is not an exhaustive list, but something to get you started.
- What would be some of the positive effects and outcomes of young people seeing these stories told on stage?
 - You might like to consider the impact on young people's identity, family, friends, wellbeing, hobbies, community, creative or career opportunities.
- Do you think Saplings can be seen as activism or advocating for Aboriginal rights and self-determination?
 - Consider websites like Australian Human Rights Commission, Uluru Statement from the Heart, AIATSIS and Aboriginal Education (NESA)
 - Start a brainstorm and definition list to help you understand key concepts like activism, self-determination, referendum, policy, consultation, cultural protocol
 - Do you know of any activism projects in the local community that support Aboriginal people? Think about events, online resources, social media, community groups or local organisations.

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?
- Discuss the qualities and differences between sound design for theatre (such as diegetic sound – within the moment, and sound design – acting as a soundscape) and other forms of theatre that incorporate music and sound, like 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.

P +61 2 9250 7770

E creativelearning@sydneyoperahouse.com

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