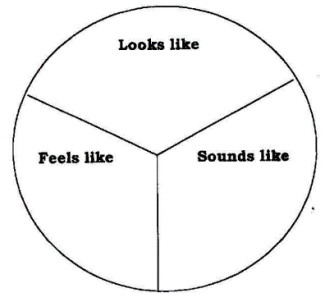


## AUSTRALIAN THEATRE

**Task A – Before reading your play or the following information, describe what you think Australian Theatre might typically look like by completing a Y-Chart in your logbook. A Y-Chart summarises what something Looks Like, Sounds Like and Feels Like, as per the image:**



**Task B – Read the following information and create a timeline. The timeline must contain information about:**

- **Important historical events**                      - Any plays and their content                      - Changes in theatre style

**You may choose to represent your timeline in the following way:**

<b><i>Date and Historical Event</i></b>	
<b><i>Plays and their content</i></b>	
<b><i>Theatrical style/s</i></b>	

What does it mean to be an Australian? What is a typical Australian? Questions of National Identity, especially in countries colonised by British settlers in the last millennium, are long standing topics of public discussion and debate.

Since the arrival of white settlers, Australia has struggled to define its own unique culture and national identity. What values are important to Australians? What does an Australian look and sound like? The answers to these questions are linked inextricably to the fundamental values of our society. The values and morals of society are in a state of flux, and as such, change with every subsequent generation, in turn, National Identity is subject to the same changes.

This quest for a unique Australian identity is mirrored and epitomised in the semiotic products of Australian culture, such as literature and drama. Popular Australian texts contain real Australian characters that embody real Australian values. The development in Australian National Identity can be seen through a study of the changes in characterisations of popular texts throughout Australian history.

The first theatre in Australia was opened in 1796 by Robert Sidaway, a convict. The theatre seated 120 people and admission was one shilling. It was closed two years later on the order of Governor Hunter, probably because of the pickpocketing and burglary associated with it. Sidaway opened another theatre in 1800, but it did not survive.

There were two early plays written about the bush ranger and convict Michael Howe, who was shot and killed in Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania) in 1818. For more than a century, bushrangers were one of the favourite subjects of Australian plays.

In 1833, the first permanent theatre, the *Theatre Royal*, was built in Sydney by Barnett Levey, with seats for 1000 people. Levey presented nearly 400 shows during the theatre's lifetime, mainly melodramas and farces, with occasional operas and Shakespearean plays. As many as five different plays were performed each week. However, the only Australian play was a short piece staged in 1835. Elsewhere, overseas plays were staged in Hobart from 1833 onwards; there were amateur theatricals in Perth during the 1830s; the first play to be staged in Adelaide opened in 1838; and Melbourne saw its first plays in 1842.

As in the rest of the world, theatre in Australia was dominated by melodrama throughout the nineteenth century. Plays were written very quickly to a formula (like today's television soaps) and included sensational situations, stereotyped heroes and villains, and tragic events resolved by happy endings. Most of the plays presented in Australia between 1840 and 1870 were imported melodramas that had been successful overseas.

There were some strong Australian melodramas and comedies written in this period, particularly by convicts. Edward Geoghegan in Sydney wrote *The Hibernian Father* and an operetta, *The Currency Lass*, while James Tucker, convict and drunkard, created the comedy *Jemmy Green* in Australia, about an innocent London lass who suffers terrible misfortunes in Australia. There was even an early attempt at tragedy: Charles Harpur's *The Bushrangers* (1853), the first Australian play published in book form in Australia. The play portrayed the notorious bushranger Jack Donahue as a tragic figure, and was written in blank verse in imitation of Shakespeare.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Australian plays became increasingly popular but theatre managers were unwilling to stage them unless they were successful in London first. *The Sunny South* was immensely popular in Australia and England. Alfred Dampier, who produced and starred in Hopkins's plays, was one of the few managers to consistently stage Australian plays in the 1880s and 1890s, in particular the stage adaptations of the novels *For the Term of His Natural Life* and *Robbery Under Arms*.

A study of early Nineteenth Century Australian literature reveals that an underlying motif in a majority of the lead characters in popular texts was of the exploration of, endurance in, and conquest of an inhospitable landscape.

Characters in popular texts of this era were depicted battling against the harsh weather, struggling against the dusty landscape and surviving insurmountable odds through determination. People could identify with these characters because they were going through the same struggle. The 1910 Steele Rudd play *On Our Selection* and C.J. Dennis's *The Sentimental Bloke* (1915) contain clear examples of these characters. The National Identity at this time reflected the virtues and values of these characters. A real Australian was a loner, working class, rural, good at manual labour, loyal, undomesticated, a hero surviving in a harsh land. The two main philosophies of this Australian were: that pastoral life was the most honest and virtuous way of living and that mateship was the most important relationship in life.

The early 1930's saw a subtle change in the National Identity and the characterisations of Australians in texts. The real Australian was now a 'Larrikin', he was all the things he was previously, only now with an ironic sense of humour and a love of drink and a good time, as is evident in Lennie Lower's novel *Here's Luck*.

The period spanning the 1940's and 1950's was a time of great social change in Australia and this affected National Identity and characterisation in texts. Post war reconstruction, post war boom, materialism, urbanisation and suburbanisation all changed the way in which Australian's lived, consequently the pastoral life previously held as the ideal, became redundant. The text that best reflects the changes of identity in this period is the Sumner Locke Elliot play *Rusty Bugles*. The play, about an army camp in the Northern Territory, captured the idiosyncrasies of Australian speech and contained realistic characters, who were no longer concerned with pastoral ideals.

The year 1954 saw the establishment of the Theatre Trust and this signalled a boom in Australian plays. A year later Ray Lawler's *The Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* was performed. This was a significant text, not only because it was the first 'Realist' play, but also it was clearly death rattle of the Australian 'Bush' identity. The pastoral life was now truly disconnected from Australian National Identity and was replaced by a suburban identity. The real Australian was now a city dweller.

The 1960's saw major changes in social ideals, established norms were now challenged and thrown into question. This period also saw development in drama and literature, where dominant and hegemonic values (mainstream or stereotypical often ruling male values) were pushed aside and marginalised repressed values were given voice. The Alex Buzo play *Norm and Ahmed* dealt with issues of immigration, multiculturalism and censorship. Marginalised identities, such as migrant Australians were given voice. Plays such as *The Shifting Heart* attacked racism and attitudes towards Australians from non-English speaking backgrounds. The Australian National Identity, while not changed in any obvious way, was subtly influenced by these newly expressed identities in popular culture. The early 1970's was dubbed the 'New Wave' of theatre and was a boom period for experimentation in Australian drama, many ground-breaking plays were written in this period. This 'New Wave' saw another metamorphosis for the National Identity and the characterisation of the real Australian in text. The National Identity developed into the 'Ocker'. The 'Ocker' is an important stage in the development of an Australian National Identity, and indeed many of its idiosyncrasies are still relevant to this day. The 'Ocker' was brash, crude, a big talker, a big drinker, middle class, and exclusively male. The 'Ocker' was an identity that many Australians, not only related to, but in fact aspired to. The clearest examples of the 'Ocker' can be seen, not only in the television personalities of Barry Humphries and Paul Hogan. But also in plays such as David Williamson's *The Removalists* and *Don's Party*.

Despite the rise in popularity of Indigenous plays and theatre such as Jack Davis's *No Sugar* and the continual addition of marginalised voices in drama, the Australian National Identity underwent no major changes in the 1980's and 1990's. This period in time saw little more than a rise in popularity of the Australian 'Ocker' stereotype. The most obvious example is the international success of *Crocodile Dundee* and later *The Crocodile Hunter*, both of whom are considered by many international citizens to be accurate and complete representations of the typical Australian.

In 2000 with the pressures and issues of globalisation the coalition of the willing and the world wide blurring of borders, issues of National Identity are as important as ever. But has Australia outgrown the 'Ocker' identity? Is the National Identity on the whole outdated? Representations in the media and popular culture would suggest that the 'Ocker' still

has a few years left in him, perhaps he is a little more health conscientious or his sporting ability has increased, but otherwise the 'Ocker' is still the big drinking, crude, macho he always was. Hannie Rayson's play *Inheritance* is perhaps one example of popular culture that, like many other plays in Australia's history, suggests the current National Identity is problematic and fundamentally flawed.

So – to sum up:

- During the early 1900's play's usually mirrored the pastoral lifestyle of the 'stockman' loner living off the land.
- However the 1930's signalled an extension of the rugged loner identity to include the larrikin.
- Between the 1940's and 50's Australian theatre continued to change as a result of huge social shifts due to global events such as World War Two, materialism and urbanisation.
- The 1960's created a window of opportunity for marginalised groups in society to be heard through theatre due to developments regarding issues of racism, multiculturalism and censorship.
- The 1970's and 80's saw the rise of the 'Ocker' and started examining more radical issues in Australian society.
- From the great classics to the new modern Australian identities represented through theatre; one point remains the same, and that is the Australian identity is forever evolving due to constant social changes and events, the demands of globalisation, pop and consumer culture, and the mass media.

From the stockman loner of the rugged land, to the 'Aussie' larrikin, the Aboriginal freedom fighter, or the (more recent) city dweller, they are all Australian. Australian theatre paints a colourful and diverse picture of Australian people, history and culture and the issues that it faces.

### A NATIONAL IMAGE

An appropriate question to ask at the end of a text on Australian theatre is: *what makes these plays Australian?*

- *Is it that they are written by Australians?*
- *Is it the setting?*
- *Is it the language and vocabulary?*
- *Is it that the attitudes, values and beliefs of Australian society are portrayed in the plays?*
- *Is it that the plays mirror a recognisable way of life?*
- *Is it the characters?*

These are some of the questions you may discuss in order to gain an appreciation of what is an Australian play, and to decide to what extent the Australian character has been explored and projected in the plays.

Throughout your play, you will have noticed the diversity of characters and character types, ranging from the early Aborigine to a recent migrant, from working-class cane cutters to sophisticated middle-class characters, from convicts to policemen. Are they Australian? What is an Australian?

### The Australian stereotype

It is difficult to define what an Australian is, yet a definite image exists.

A stereotypical 'dinkum Aussie' character developed in the last century and was associated with the bush ethos and pioneering life of the outback. This image was perpetuated by Henry Lawson, Banjo Paterson, C. J. Dennis and Steele Rudd, who popularised certain attitudes in their writings. Some of these stereotypical characters and attitudes are:

Characters	Attitudes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The rough practical man</li> <li>• The bushie</li> <li>• The Aussie battler</li> <li>• The pioneering woman</li> <li>• The outback loner</li> <li>• The lonely mother and wife</li> <li>• The rebel/larrikin</li> <li>• The digger</li> <li>• The racist; intolerant of foreigners</li> <li>• The irreverent, swearing, gambling man</li> <li>• The knocker</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Loyalty to one's mates</li> <li>• Sympathy for the underdog</li> <li>• Equal to others</li> <li>• Easy going, down to earth</li> <li>• No affectations</li> <li>• Standing up for one's rights</li> <li>• Anti-authoritarian</li> <li>• Sceptical of religion, education and culture</li> <li>• Independent</li> <li>• The changing image</li> </ul>

This profile of the 'typical' Australian certainly does not present an accurate picture, but it does seem to be widely accepted, as Australians appear to identify with such attitudes.

However, as city suburbs and large towns became the backdrop for the twentieth century Australian, other characters and social traits became evident, such as:

- The sophisticated urban dweller
- Leisure before work
- Having a good time/pursuit of fun
- The career woman
- The sporty, healthy character
- The uncouth, unrefined character
- The rugged individualist
- The pub drinker
- The macho chauvinist
- The mean, aggressive character
- Loyal, hard-working characters

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**Task C – add at least 5 other characteristics / characters which you feel contribute to the changing image of an Australian.**

What is particularly evident today is that Australia is no longer a homogenous, conformist society. It is accepting the reality of cultural and social pluralism. The diversity of social sub-groups such as the women's movement, the Aboriginal movement, the environmental movement and various ethnic groups is proof that Australians are breaking away from traditional Australian mores. Thus, the national image comprises a whole range of *values, attitudes* and *beliefs* about Australian life. Amongst these are the following:

- Australia is the lucky country
- Australia is the land of opportunity
- Australia is an egalitarian society
- Multiculturalism
- Education is a good thing
- Individualism
- Women are equal to men
- Home ownership
- Progress must go ahead
- Mateship
- She'll be right mate/ Near enough/ Give it a go/ No problems/ A fair go
- Life wasn't meant to be easy
- A fair day's pay for a fair day's work

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**Task D – add at least 3 other values and attitudes which you feel contribute to the changing image of an Australian.**

**Task E – To what extent does your play address the following statements? Answer each, with two pieces of evidence from the play. Evidence could be: characters, themes / issues / messages which arise, theatrical conventions, design conventions, symbols, images**

1. Australian drama was exploring issues of concern relevant for the time.
2. Australian drama was gaining the confidence to be more critical of aspects of Australian life.
3. Australian drama was no longer dominated by Australian stereotypical characters.
4. Characters in Australian plays were speaking more and more in the Australian tongue.
5. The more subtle and complex aspects of Australian humour were being represented.
6. The play presents different images of the Australian identity.
7. The play was stylistically innovative.