The Secret River: Crossing the Curriculum

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Andrew Bovell and the Sydney Theatre Company's stage adaptation of Kate Grenville's The Secret River *offers teachers a diverse range of approaches and strategies to embed 'learning across the curriculum' activities whilst also deepening students' ability to critically analyse drama texts.*

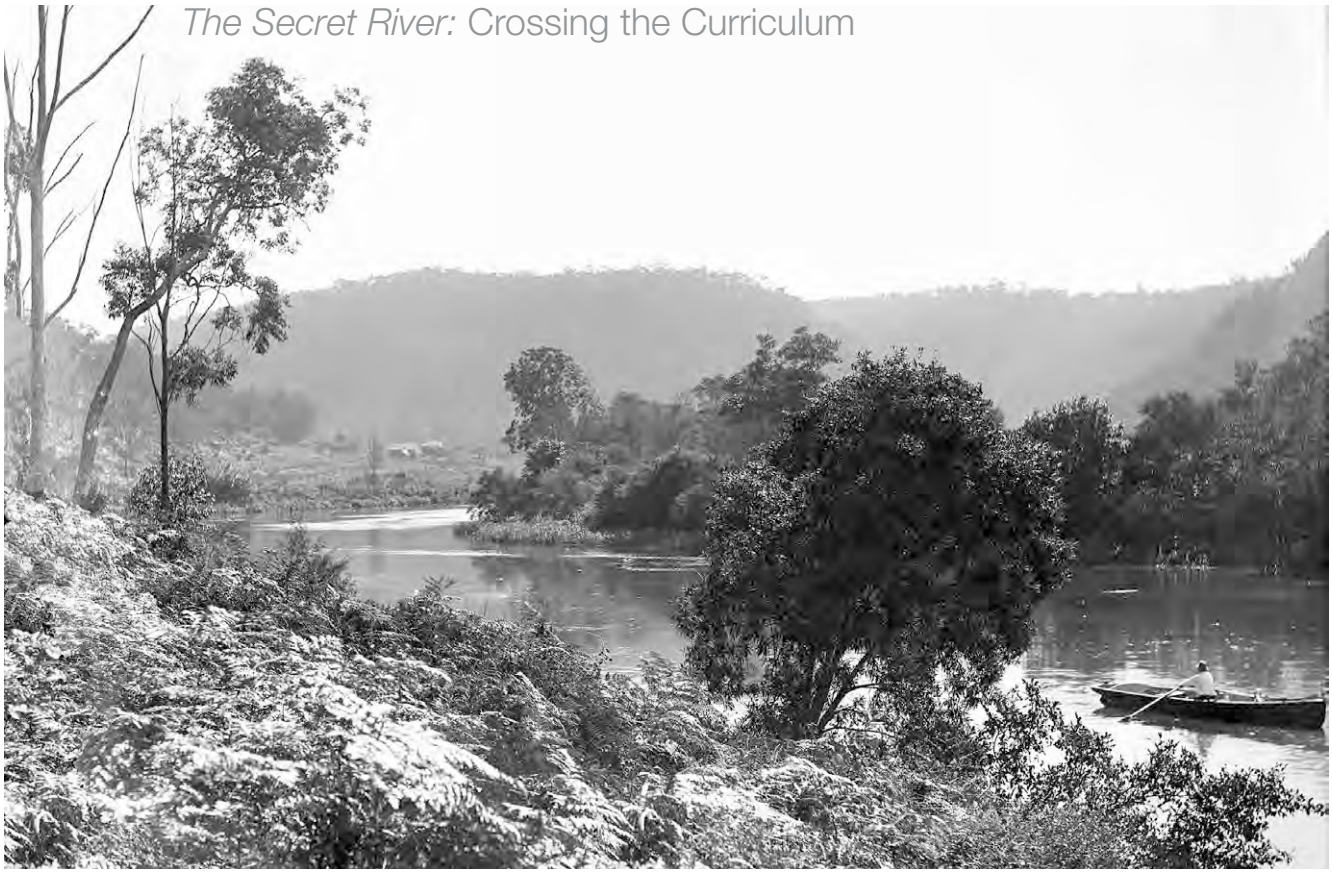
The play has won critical acclaim as a 'shattering piece of theatre that goes to the heart of our history' for its depiction of the human tragedy in a chapter of Australia's discovery; the consequences of which we live with today. (Sunday Telegraph, 2016) Bovell sets the historical fiction over a seventh month period between September 1813 to April 1814. The story frames a brief time in ex-convict William Thornhill's life, as he attempts to stake out a piece of land on the Hawkesbury River in the expanding colony of New South Wales. This inevitably brings him into contact with the traditional owners of the land, the Dharug peoples, setting the premise for the tragedy to unfold. The raw and graphic depiction of scenes based on real events challenges the audience to reconsider what they 'know' about the past and its ramifications for the present. The text, more commonly the novel, is often suggested as related material for the AOS: Discovery, but the play has much to offer and its ability to be read in little more than two hours enables students to focus on deep analysis. As an adapted work of historical fiction, *The Secret River* lends itself to many of the 'Learning Across the Curriculum' outcomes. The priorities of 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures' and 'Sustainability' are represented extensively in the play.

While the director is not Indigenous, the text goes a long way to giving a voice to the First Australians, juxtaposing their perspective against the Europeans throughout the production. Bovell starts the play with the Yalamundi's mob preparing dinner by the side of the river. They speak in their own language, 'Wyabuininyah minga waddiwadi yira guyun guminga-da'[1] (Bovell, 2013, Prologue) a unique characteristic of the play, which immediately isolates the audience, tangibly conveying the difficulties of cultural communication for both the characters and the modern spectators. Bovell along with his collaborators Neil Armfield and Stephen Page had originally assumed that the language had died out, an anecdote that he warmly recounts in his notes on the play,

> We thought that the languages spoken around the Hawkesbury had largely been lost. For a while it seemed like an insurmountable problem. And then Richard Green, an actor and Dharug man, joined the project. We put the problem to him. He laughed and opened his mouth and spoke and sang in Dharug. It was, he argued passionately, a lie that the language didn't exist. If it had been lost it had now been refound, rebuilt and reclaimed. It was a living language. And no white academic was going to tell Richard that he had no language (Bovell, 2015)

We used this opportunity in class to watch a recent news report which featured Indigenous Language Foundation President Rachel Perkins discussing how the processes of colonisation, the banning of Indigenous languages on reservations, the effects of the Stolen Generation,and the lack of documentation in the modern world are contributing to the disappearance of languages. She explained,'It's not only a way to communicate, but it includes a great body of knowledge… about the environment, ecological knowledge, plant names, site names… and spiritual knowledge.' (Perkins, 2016) In response to this report and an article on the human right to speak your own language, students were encouraged to examine the value of retaining Indigenous language and its significance in the play. The discussion also included students' own perspectives on the value of language in their families and how that has helped them to retain parts of their own cultures.

Bovell gives the audience a translator in another of the unique qualities of the play, the character of Dhirrumbin the narrator, who not only offers an indigenous point of view, but a female one. Her name comes from the Dharug word for the Hawkesbury, as Bovell explains, 'In effect, she is the river, a witness to history, present before, during and after the events of the play' (Brown, 2016) As



Man in a boat, Hawkesbury River by William Frederick Hall between 1880 and 1909 Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Man_in_a_boat,_possibly_on_the_Hawkesbury_River_near_Singleton%27s_Mill,_1880-1909_(7405442902).jpg

such, she symbolically emerges from the river in the prologue. Throughout the play she stands on stage apart from the action, witnessing the events and giving the audience a vision into the minds of the characters. Dhirrumbin allows Bovell to use some of the original poetic language of Granville to add depth to the authority of the Indigenous perspective and to provide a bridge of understanding between the audience and the Dharug. She illuminates Yalamundi's perceptions at the beginning, '[he] felt the pain in his chest. Because he knew something was about to change. And he didn't know how to stop it' contrasting this with an ironic metaphor for Thornhill's perspective, '[he] saw only a blank page on which a man might write a new life.' (Bovell, 2013, Prologue) The parallel structure of both families' experiences is followed through the remainder of the play, allowing the playwright to contrast their perspectives, cultures, motivations, and fears.

A significant point of difference, central to the tension in the play, is the treatment of the land and approaches to ownership. Studying the text allows students to explore aspects of environmental and social sustainability by questioning modern views of 'possession' in light of the early history of our country. *The Secret River* presents a complex and critical view of early colonial expansion, often ironically portraying the 'civilised' European characters as 'savage' in their land lust. Whenever we hear from the indigenous characters about the land they are discussing caring for it or respecting country, whilst in contrast, the settlers aim is to 'own' the land.

Across the opening scenes, Thornhill, working within the notion of ***terra nullis,*** states, 'all you need to do is plant your backside somewhere and leave it there long enough and it's yours... Put in a crop and say it's theirs. Even given it their name.' (Prologue) To him, planting a crop is, symbolically, as good as 'raising a flag over it' (Act 1, Sc. 3). Here he employs a European concept of ownership.[2] A later scene carries some biblical allusion to Moses's surveying the 'promised land' when Thornhill looks out over his camp from a ridge above. He names the land 'Thornhill's point', further strengthening his claim to the land in his mind. Like Moses, Thornhill never gets to enter the 'promised' land because he breaks his moral code. Dhirrumbin narrates, 'With each tree he touched he said this is my tree and with each rock he climb he said this is my rock... And he laughed at the thought of how easy it was to own a piece of land. All a man has to do was stand upon it.' (Act 1, Sc. 2) Students can examine the irony in these lines. Weren't Indigenous people standing on the same land? Why weren't they able to claim it? Weren't they considered human?

The dichotomy in perspectives is revealed through Bovell's stage directions which employ a significant degree of natural imagery. In reference to Yalamundi, he describes, 'authority radiates off him like heat off a fire. A stream of words begin to come out of his mouth' and in the same scene Buryia is depicted as standing her ground 'the way a tree stands on its piece of earth.' (Act 1, Sc. 7) Throughout the text, Indigenous characters are depicted as a part of the landscape; connected to the land as a part of their being. Thornhill's instructions to stay away, 'out of our place' (Act 1 Sc. 7), are duly juxtaposed, 'The words pass, leaving a silence behind them.' This emphasises the emptiness of the words to the audience who are becoming aware of the shallowness of his claims as the scene progresses. The divergent ideas also extend to the use of the land, offering students an opportunity to branch across the curriculum by challenging perceptions of land ownership, modern industrialisation and environmental issues like mining and deforestation. Thornhill and his sons are depicted as, 'breaking, digging and turning the soil, casting the daisy plants aside' (Act 1, Sc. 3) whilst similar imagery is repeated at Smasher Sullivan's place to a darker extent, 'Sullivan's Creek... was a crooked length of water... In there the sun shone coldly and the water was as black as a mirror. Not a breath of wind stirred its glassy surface or blew away the stain of smoke... The block had been cleared of all timber, used for fuel and sat like a gash in the forest.' (Act 1, Sc. 11) The oxymoron and unnatural descriptions reflect his character, but also the Europeans' destruction of traditional lands, a point not lost on the Dharug, and in Yalamundi's objection to Thornhill's farming practices, 'This is our country... The river and those ridges. We look after these places' (Act 1, Sc. 3) As he speaks he uses a fluid motion with his hand that 'fattens as a bedcover'. Yet, possibly the most striking connection comes in the final words of the play in Ngalamalum's first words in the English language[3] exclaim, 'NO!... This Me… My Place.' Bovell has just plied the audience with a contextually familiar phrase from Thornhill, 'You gotta learn to help yourselves now. Can't be sitting around in the dirt all day like bludgers.' It is a powerful ending that is designed to challenge the viewer's concept of dispossession and the condition of Indigenous relations today. Ngalamalum's words 'this me' signify his belief system that the land is not for possession: he does not own it, it is him.

The savagery of the early interactions of cultures are laid bare in several sequences in the play. Again, this opens the class to considering 'Social Capability', 'Intercultural Understanding', 'Ethical Understanding' and 'Difference and Diversity' outcomes. The dehumanising colonial discourse of the settlers is expressed most lucidly in their language about or towards the first Australians. Nonetheless, Bovell and Armfield use the play to 'emphasise the common humanity of the Dharug and Europeans' (Reynolds, 2013) Although the settlers often use emotive terms like 'wild hogs' and 'thieving blacks' as well as animalistic phraseology, 'might as well bloody bark' or 'monkey food I would call that' in reference to the Indigenous cast, Bovell directly contradicts this with what is represented on stage. The prejudiced social Darwinism of the time is consistently undermined by the paralleling of the families' lives. In Act 2, another European character, Loveday, suggests that money is on offer for trade in Aboriginal body parts and that, 'for the scientific gentleman. Pickling [Aboriginal heads] retains the greatest degree of data.' (Act 2 Scene 13) However, in the next scene Thornhill's discovery of a dying Aboriginal boy[4] prompts the following moment, '[Thornhill kneels down and takes the boy in his arms] He was surprised at the softness of the boy's black hair… and under it he felt the shape of his skull, the same as his own son's.' This powerful image continues to reinforce the common humanity, building on other symbols like the identical campfire settings. Sal's[5] realisation at the end is emphasised when she states, 'They was here... Like you and me in London. Just the exact same way. You never told me. Even got a broom to clean it [the campsite]. Just like I got myself' (Act 2 Sc. 16) In response, we took the opportunity to research the repatriation of Aboriginal remains and artefacts from museums and Universities around the world. The Creative Spirits website, the National Museum of Australia, and recent news articles detail the history of organisations who are bringing back stolen ancestors and cultural items, returning them to their traditional lands. Discussions centred on the moral implications of these events, the way we treat people of other nationalities and cultures, and the steps towards reconciliation that are still needed.

The play's final scenes, an echo to Greek tragedy, overlay the violence on stage with the singing of the children's nursery rhyme *London Bridge*. The intertexuality has been used throughout the play, but

it is brought to the forefront as the men aggressively sing 'London Bridge is falling down… build it up with wood and clay… wood and clay will wash away, my fair lady' (Act 2, Sc. 18) during the ambush and massacre of the Indigenous family. The allusion to *terra nullis* is not lost on the audience and the biting irony of these 'civilised' men committing such an atrocity creates an emotionally haunting conclusion. Songs are used in the play as another unique parallel between the two groups, often helping to build on thematic concerns like connections to land and cultural interactions. The Dharug song of country is sung over the top of the settlers' *Little Fishy* at the end of Act 1, symbolising an interesting cultural interaction as the simple nursery rhyme is drowned out by the echoes of the Dharug, whose song 'rises up over the ridge and fills the valley and the next valley and the next' (Act 1, Sc. 13).

More than once Bovell challenges the audience to consider the implications of those early years and the legacy that has been left to us. His unique blend of theatrical techniques allows for a rich study of the qualities of text, together with a range of themes that carry many links across the curriculum.

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(Endnotes)

1 In the performance, the words are not subtitled, but the published script contains a translation.

2 Indigenous peoples didn't have an official flag until 1971

3 Which he has learnt as a one of the few survivors of the massacre at the end of Act 2. He has had time to learn the language and return to the campsite of the Hawkesbury only to be told to move on by Thornhill.

4 Whose waterhole had been poisoned by a white character in the play. His family dead, the boy is in the last death throws before passing away.

5 Thornhill's wife.

Camp set up, Hawkesbury River by William Frederick Hall between 1880 and 1909. Source: ttps://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/90/Camp_set_up%2C_possibly_by_the_Hawkesbury_River%2C_1880-1909_%287405441616%29.jpg