

***The Drover's Wife*, by Leah Purcell**

Education Pack

THEMES:

RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

GENDER & RACE

HERITAGE

GENRE: Realism / Period piece

AGE RESTRICTION: 16+ (strong language, weapons and explicit sexual violence)

NUMBER OF CHARACTERS: 8 (1F, 7M)

CHARACTER LIST:

MOLLY JOHNSON / THE DROVER'S WIFE: (FEMALE) A mother whose husband is absent trying to protect her children. Pregnant. (40)

YADAKA / BLACK: (MALE) Young aboriginal man, escaping the authorities who accuse him of a crime he says he did not commit. (38-45)

DANNY JOHNSON: (MALE) Molly's son. He is quite enticed by Yadaka's dexterity and assumes a learner position towards him. (14)

Multiple Characters who can be played by two actors:

Douglas Merchant (MALE): a peddler (35-40)

Spencer Leslie (MALE): a trooper (35-40)

John McPharlen (MALE): a stockman (25)

Thomas McNealy (MALE): a swagman (60)

Robert Parsen (MALE): a stockman (45-50)

SYNOPSIS:

Living in the Snowy Mountains, New South Wales, Australia in 1893, a heavily pregnant woman, Molly Johnson encounters Yadaka, an Aboriginal man on the run from the colonial authorities. Her husband is away for long periods as a drover leaving Danny, her son, to adopt Yadaka as a father figure, assuming a learner position towards him. Over a few days, and the visit of a trooper, a peddler, a swagman and a pair of stockmen, they will find out more about each other's origins, and discover the real meaning of belonging.

The Drover's Wife is a play written in English by Leah Purcell. It is loosely based on the classic short story of the same name by Henry Lawson. It premiered at the Belvoir St Theatre in Sydney in 2016, directed by Leticia Càceres. The cast included Purcell in the title role, Mark Coles Smith, Tony Cogan, Benedict Hardie, and Will McDonald.

KEY MOMENTS:

pp. 99-106 (3 characters - 1F, 2M)

Dialogue: Molly and Yadaka converse after Danny leaves. Strong dialogue about different struggles.

pp. 153-156 (1 character - 1F)

Monologue: Scene 8. Strong musical monologue in form of a wail. The character comes to terms with her origin and her instant identification with Yadaka.

pp. 107-117 (3 characters - 1F, 2M)

Climax: Not necessarily the active climax of the play, but the scene between Molly, Yadaka and the Merchant is packed with strong dialogues and power displays; a feast to work actors non-verbal communication on stage.

STEP ONE: ASK

What questions come to the students' minds when they read these key moments? In groups, ask them to come up with questions based on the play which have no easy answers. Think about the themes raised above and try to combine more than one concept in each question. Here are some examples:

- What does it mean to belong to a tribe? Have you ever felt you've belonged to one? What makes a tribe?
- Can you think of any recent scenarios in our society where people's ethnicity and their own safety were put in jeopardy due to the structural and/or institutional racism they suffer? (Suggestions to start discussion: Mark Duggan's case in Britain, Eric Garner's and more recently George Floyd's in the US, the spike in racially charged abuse towards asian minorities worldwide due to the pandemic.)

Consider these questions across racial discrimination/violence, gender and race intersectional issues/toxic gender roles, ethnic identity issues within mixed raced post-colonial societies and explore if students can relate to the issues portrayed in this text.

STEP TWO: EXPLORE

Exercise 1:

Human Naughts and Crosses – split the group into two (naughts and crosses) and assign them numbers (there should be an equal number either group so there are the same number represented in both groups). Set up nine chairs in three rows of three. As the facilitator calls a number the first group to take a seat starts and the game goes on until one team is victorious or they draw. To increase the competitiveness and the physicality, call out numbers for both teams until the end. Whoever sits first, takes the place. This is a good bonding exercise and brings the group together towards a goal before starting with text. It can also exacerbate the tribal sense amongst them by defending their own group towards the victory.

Exercise 2:

At the end of scene six (pp.107-117) we are introduced to the Merchant, whose arrival throws off the intimacy being established between Molly and Yadaka, and paints with stronger brushes the racial disparity and privileges of perceived whiteness.

Yes, but... - The group is reunited to tell a story (this can be adapted as to make them retell the story of the play and/or focus in one of the characters' arc) however, each participant only gets to say a sentence and the person to follow has to start their next sentence with "Yes, but..." The objective is for them to shape the story in a way that every follow up contradicts the previous statement

Follow up with = Yes, and... - a positive variant of the previous exercise. This time they will try and tell the same story but follow ups should all start with "Yes, and...". Participants should then compare both stories and discuss the differences observed when the story is being told in competition of facts and when all storytellers are in agreement. Expand the question to perceived privileges and hierarchies; do they notice a natural leader of the story emerging? How did they come about? How did they assert their leadership/power? How was that power counteracted?

Exercise 3:

Early in the play/scene five (pp.81-96), Molly is starting to get used to having Yadaka around and see her boy, Danny, taking a liking towards him. However she feels she needs to play "bad cop" and stray the boy away from admiring someone who she considers inferior, an outcast. Hers and Yadaka's style of "parenting" and approaches to teaching are clearly exposed. A fun exercise that can be played to demonstrate this is -

Director vs cast. Split them in two groups, giving them a short scene to study (preferably an action scene, when an outside character appears, as scene one, six, or seven) and prepare a short ad libbed performance. They should choose one director per team and directors are to be taken away from the group and given their roles – one will be the "good" director and go along with anything their cast proposes, avoid imposing their ideas, allowing all actors to have a voice; the other will be the "evil" director, who will guide every minutia of the performance, not tolerating questioning or suggestions. The trick is that the casts will also have been given instructions: the "good" director's cast should simply agree with whatever the

director says, and do something completely different when performing; the “evil” director’s cast should always ask why for any directorial choice, challenging anything the director says. Once they showcase their performances bring them to a circle and allow them to debate their roles and their experiences with hierarchical roles – is there a positive approach to hierarchy?

STEP THREE: FEEDBACK

Discuss what came up for the students. Can they relate with the characters’ plight? What was the most interesting thing they learned? Bring students to return to the text and analyse what they are taking away from the exercises for their character study- if they have been assigned their characters already. Once the text is read in its entirety, perhaps pose the further questions:

- How different does one experience the world because of the colour of their skin or their ethnicity? How does that reflect in today’s society?
- How does it show the hierarchy of power between the characters? Are those hierarchical relationships fixed or do they change over time?
- Does the pursuit of freedom and/or justice justify a crime, a murder? How can this be analysed in Yadaka’s case?

APPENDIX

STRUCTURE:

This play is divided into nine scenes:

Scene 1. Molly, Yadaka, McNealy – first encounter, establishes that Yadaka is protective of her, strong and knows how to defend himself, he helps her in labour.

Scene 2. Molly, Yadaka – we learn she lost a baby girl, and that he has been to stay in exchange for helping around the property. They learn more of each other's origins and she starts to show signs of trusting him.

Scene 3. Molly, Yadaka, Danny – Danny is introduced to Yadaka and learns of his baby sister's demise. We learn she has three other children, and see them bury the baby's corpse.

Scene 4. same characters – We learn that Molly had a close relationship with her father but knows little about her mother. We start to see Danny's admiration of Yadaka's dexterity with the spears.

Scene 5. Danny, Yadaka, (later) Molly – Danny learns from Yadaka how to hold a spear and a few self-protection tips. They share their scars and their stories with father figures.

Scene 6. Danny, Yadaka, Molly, (later) Merchant – Danny goes to fetch his siblings, but asks Yadaka not to leave before he returns. As Molly and Yadaka reminisce over their plights, a Merchant arrives and power positions are made obvious.

Scene 7. (trigger warning: rape scene) Molly, Yadaka, (later) Leslie, Parsen, McPharlen – Yadaka concludes that Molly's mother is Aboriginal and their discussion is interrupted by the arrival of a trooper. Guns are drawn. Molly kills the trooper and it is revealed she also killed her abusive husband. Soon Parsen arrives, followed by McPharlen, stockmen, for a final showdown.

Scene 8. Molly, Yadaka (off-stage/corpse) – Raped and hurt, Molly says goodbye to Yadaka.

Scene 9. Molly, Danny – We learn that the authorities have taken Molly's other children. Danny learns of Yadaka's passing. Molly embraces her origins, and prepares Danny to become a man, rescue his siblings and avenge Yadaka and herself.