

***The Visitors*, by Jane Harrison**

Education Pack

THEMES:

COLONIALISM & CONQUEST

TRADITION

COUNCIL & DECISION-MAKING

GENRE: Drama, a fictional account based on actual events

AGE RESTRICTION: 12+

NUMBER OF CHARACTERS: 7 (7M)

CHARACTER LIST:

GARY [WALLUMEDEGAL] – Northern Parramatta river mob. The ‘Bureaucrat/ numbers man’, he is the current Chair of the current meeting, having been elected in the previous meeting.

LAWRENCE [GWEAGAL] – Botany Bay mob, Fire clan. Youngest. ‘Almost initiated’, he is eager to learn from the elders and carries first-hand knowledge of the ‘visitors’ having visited their ship when they first landed 18 years ago.

GORDON [CADIGAL] - Sydney Cove – harbour dwelling clan. The ‘General’, he is the most adamant that the ‘visitors’ must be sent away.

ALBERT [WANGAL] – South shore clan - The ‘Engineer/Mr Logic’. He seeks evidence, fact and knowledge in assessing the situation to make a decision.

JACOB [CAMERAGAL] - Manly Cove – North shore clan. The ‘Joker’. The ‘Tradie’, a humorous presence, cannot stop talking about the troubles he is having with his new wife.

WALTER [BURRAMATTAGAL] – River mob - Eel place clan. The ‘Anthropologist/philosopher’, he is a deep thinker, well-spoken and sees both sides of the dilemma.

JOSEPH [KAMEYGAL] - Headlands of the Bay - Spear Clan, La Perouse area. The ‘Doctor/healer’, he is the eldest and is eventually swayed by Walter.

SYNOPSIS:

The play centres around the pivotal historic moment when the First Fleet dropped anchor in Australia in 1788. It imagines a discussion between a group of Indigenous leaders trying to reach a consensus as to what to do about the approaching vessels on the horizon.

The seven clan leaders gather on a headland overlooking a stunning harbour for a crucial war council. A strange sight greets them -- ships of a type and largesse never seen before. Where are they from? Who and what do they carry? Should they be welcomed, or should they be wary? Each of the leaders has a distinct personality and a divergent position as to what to do about the visitors.

Muruwari playwright Jane Harrison’s script is a witty imagining of what went before that fateful encounter. It premiered at Sydney Festival 2020, and was produced by Mooghalin Performing Arts.

KEY MOMENTS:

pp.28-33 (7M)

In this crucial segment of the conversation among the elders, we get an insight into the sophisticated decision-making process clansmen would have engaged in to respond to situations of crisis. They invoke logic, reason, evidence and knowledge as necessary prerequisites to any contribution. This dismantles a Euro-centric construction of the world, wherein the natives of

the colonized countries are largely dismissed as having been ‘uncivilised’ prior to the arrival of the colonialist.

pp.39-58 (7M)

The men discuss first- and second-hand experiences of their encounter with the ‘visitors’ 18 years earlier. They express shock at their barbaric ways – the way they cut the trees without consideration for the land, slaughter sting rays as old as their ‘father’s father’s father’ and ‘borrow forever’ what is not theirs and without giving something back in return.

pp.63 (1M)

In this closing monologue, Gordon welcomes the visitors while also speaking of his respect and knowledge of the land as if it were his own self.

STEP ONE: EXPLORE

Read out the dialogue on pp.28-33. Then share the saying by author Chinua Achebe:

‘Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.’

What philosophical questions does the dialogue and quote raise in the students’ minds? In groups, ask them to come up with questions based on the scene, and which have no easy answers. Think about the themes raised and perhaps try to combine more than one concept in a single question to broaden out the potential for the discussion. For example:

- When the story of colonialism has primarily been told from the perspective of the victor for so long, what can be done to amplify other stories and perspectives that continue to be drowned out by the dominant narrative? Are the mediums of theatre, film and novels sufficient to rectify the narrative imbalance?

Vote to select one of the questions and discuss it, keeping the fruits of your conversations (themes, further questions, provocations, points of discomfort...etc) alive as you go through the exercises below.

STEP TWO: EXPLORE

Exercise 1:

Harrison re-imagines what might have happened when the First Fleet of Europeans arrived at Sydney Harbour. In her rendition of the meeting between six elders and a young representative sent by an elder unable (or unwilling) to join, we encounter articulate, considerate people who laugh and grow frustrated with one another and lose their temper and look after each other lovingly. In short, we encounter three-dimensional human beings where the story of colonisation had painted 'natives' as flat recipients of conquest. Indeed, the whole play is essentially an exploration of multiple perspectives to reach a single conclusion.

Ask the students to think of a time when they won something, or emerged as a victor. Ask for volunteers to share this story, giving details as to the nature of the relationship, what happened, where they were, how they felt...etc. Give the students boundaries, asking them to only share stories they are perfectly happy to divulge.

Once a volunteer has shared their story, ask someone else to present an alternative perspective to that story, speaking in the first person – how others in the story might have experienced the situation and which the storyteller may have not considered.

For example, the Storyteller might say, 'We had a debate in politics class and my arguments were so good and on point. No one was able to disagree with me, so I did really well.'

An alternative perspective from another student in that class might be, 'She's a very confident person and I am shy. I have good ideas but I'm not a good public speaker. If we were able to express ourselves in other ways, I would have probably been able to put my opinion across well.'

Exercise 2:

Read the conversation pp. 39-58, where we learn about the Indigenous Australians' low opinion of the visitors' ways – disrespect of the land, of each other and of others. Equally, we learn that the visitors have useful things, such as the knife picked up by Walter, and we learn of the anticipation that they may bring other useful technologies.

Note that the play requires that the characters wear 'fine modern suits' – Western-style ties, shirts, jackets and trousers. Divide the class into groups and ask them to read through the scene together, and follow with a discussion over this seeming contradiction: the choice to represent 'modernity' through Western attire seems to contradict the play's offer of an alternative perspective to history, giving voice to ancestral Indigenous Australians as an advanced people.

Once the groups have had a chance to share their ideas, open up the discussion to the whole class. Can they come up with a consensus, as the Elders did in the play, as to how they would dress the characters to reflect the play's position on colonialism?

Exercise 3:

Gordon's closing monologue on p. 63 is a powerful summation of the indigenous people's attitude towards their land – the respect they harbor for all living things and for their traditions in welcoming visitors, even at the risk of bringing themselves harm. In many ways, Gordon is speaking in many tongues – the monologue is the conclusion of the seven clansmen's discussions. In these discussions, they do not speak for themselves as individuals, but as representatives of their people.

Prepare the class as a whole to speak the monologue simultaneously. Tell them that no one will be the leader and that they must take their time to go forth together. As the elders repeatedly say in the play 'We have time'.

You may want to prepare the class with a group count to 10. In a circle, everyone closes their eyes, and they take their time to count up to 10, one at

a time, popcorn-style. If two people call out a number at the same time, the group must start again.

Once they have counted to 10, discuss what it took to count together. Some responses may be:

- Listening more than speaking
- Making space for others
- Counting as one
- Sensing one another

See also the agreement between the elders at the bottom of p.7 as spoken by Gary:

We speak one at a time, using the message stick. Agreed?

We listen more than we speak.

We stay until we all agree.

The agreement is for greater good, not favouring any one clan group.

Now ask the class what it would take to read Gordon's monologue together, as a group, in one voice and with no one leading. Once the group has agreed what it will take, give it a go!

STEP THREE: FEEDBACK

Discuss what came up for the students. What are they still wondering about? What was the most interesting thing they learned? What was their least favourite part and why?