



KOAL

EDUCATION PACK

BY JACINTA YELLAND & TREY LYFORD



gimmick

**THE
WORK**

CONTENTS

- 01** Acknowledgements & Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property
- 02** Meet the Creators
- 04** Synopsis
- 05** Why We Made KOAL
- 06** Director's Note
- 07** Curriculum Links
- 08** Pre-Show Discussion
- 09** Themes
- 14** Stylistic Influences
- 18** Post-Show Activities
- 19** Further Reading
- 19** Ways You Can Help



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land across Australia and recognise their enduring connection to land, waters, skies, and community.

We pay our respects to Elders past and present, and extend that respect to all First Nations peoples today. Sovereignty was never ceded.
Always was, always will be, Aboriginal land.

We are deeply grateful to the many generous donors whose support made the development and productions of KOAL possible. While we are unable to name each of you individually, please know that your belief in this work and your contributions were invaluable. Your encouragement helped bring this story to life, and we thank you from the bottom of our hearts.

Special thanks to Suli Holum and The Work, gimmick, The Puffin Foundation Ltd., Fresh Ground Pepper NYC, City of Philadelphia, Philadelphia Asian Performing Artists, and Rasma and Stephen Yelland for supporting this work from its inception.

This play is dedicated to Marcella, Aiden, Maddox, Ruya, Sonny, Cleo and all that exists in the more-than-human world.

THE WORK



INDIGENOUS CULTURAL AND INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY

We acknowledge the industry standards and protocols set by the Australia Council for the Arts: Protocols for working with Indigenous Artists (2007). These protocols have been widely adopted in the Australian arts to respect ICIP and to develop practices and processes for working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and cultural heritage.

We incorporate ICIP into our projects, from storytelling to dance, to set design, language and music.

In creating and sharing KOAL, the team acknowledges the generous contributions of Meriam Mer women Marcella Lee and Rasma Yelland, whose family stories inspired the character of Minah. Their stories are used with the authority and permission of Jacinta Yelland, Marcella Lee, and Rasma Yelland, grounded in their cultural and familial connections to this part of the Torres Strait. As proud Meriam Mer descendants from Waiben, Marcella Lee and Rasma Yelland affirm that the work draws on their lived experiences and family history, and they fully support Jacinta Yelland in sharing this story.

MEET THE CREATIVES

PERFORMER & CREATOR

Jacinta Yelland

DIRECTOR, CREATOR AND ADDITIONAL SOUND DESIGN

Trey Lyford

ORIGINAL MUSIC & SOUND DESIGN

Ethan Mentzer

SET DESIGN

Payton Smith

MASKS

Barbaric Yawp Workshop

COSTUME CONSULTANT

Grace Lillian Lee

STAGE MANAGER

Emmie Parker

PRODUCTION IMAGES

Ashley Smith of Wide Eyed Studios
and HanJie Chow



JACINTA YELLAND

Co-Creator & Performer

Jacinta Yelland is an Australian theatre creator and performer of Chinese and Torres Strait Islander descent, based in Philadelphia, USA. Jacinta has collaborated with RealTV, Zen Zen Zo Physical Theatre, Elbow Room Productions, Australia's National Play Festival, Opera Philadelphia, David Gordon, Pig Iron Theatre Company, Quintessence Theatre Group, and People's Light. She holds an MFA in Devised Performance from University of the Arts/Pig Iron Theatre Company, completed the Zen Zen Zo Physical Theatre Company Internship, and was supported by Arts Queensland to study at École Philippe Gaulier, Paris. With the support of Australia Council for the Arts, Jacinta attended The Hemispheric Institute's 11th Encuentro in Mexico City in 2019 where she collaborated with artists, activists and academics to create theatre that addresses climate change. Her work has been supported by Creative Australia, Arts Queensland, American Australian Association, Network of Ensemble Theaters, City of Philadelphia, The Puffin Foundation Ltd., and The Work. www.jacintayelland.com



TREY LYFORD

Co-Creator & Director

Trey Lyford has been creating original works for the stage for nearly two decades and most recently with his theatre company - gimmick. Lyford is the founding Co-Artistic Director of rainpan 43 where he has, along with colleague Geoff Sobelle, created and performed in all of their works to date. Following a world tour of r43's first piece *all wear bowlers* (2005 Drama Desk Nomination, Innovative Theatre Award), r43 followed up with *Amnesia Curiosa*, the OBIE award-winning kinetic junk sculpture play *machines, machines, machines, machines, machines, machines, machines*, and the much toured absurd magic show *Elephant Room*. In 2020 they premiered the commissioned ZOOM performance work *Elephant Room: Dust From the Stars* at the Philadelphia FringeArts Festival as well as LA's Center Theater Group. He has performed his original works in four continents including venues across the U.S. such as LA's Center Theatre Group, Philadelphia FringeArts, HERE Arts Center, St. Ann's Warehouse, La Jolla Playhouse, Berkeley Rep, Studio Theater, Arena Stage, and theaters throughout NYC. Further support for his work includes grants from Creative Capital, NEFA, NYSCA, and PEW Center for Arts & Heritage. Lyford is also an Associate Artist with The Civilians and a faculty member at UArts and the Pig Iron MFA in Devised Performance. www.treilyford.com



ETHAN MENTZER

Original Music & Sound Design

Ethan Mentzer is a musician, composer, producer and engineer based in Philadelphia. Mentzer holds a Bachelor's Degree in Music Production and Engineering from Berklee College of Music. At Berklee he met his co-founding bandmates of The Click Five (Lava/ Atlantic). Ethan has composed music for commercials, film and TV including Daybreak, Shameless, Bad Night, Yours, Mine & Ours, Igor, Bigger Fatter Liar, Power Rangers, Sydney White, Taking 5, John Tucker Must Die, Hey Fibi. He composed the music for inFLUX Theatre Collective's award-winning show The Choice. He is the recipient of a Boston Music Award and the MTV VMA Knockout Award. www.ethanmentzer.com



PAYTON SMITH

Set Design

Payton Smith is an interdisciplinary theatre maker. She has performed, crafted, designed, directed, and stage managed in Philadelphia, New York, New Orleans, and Santa Fe. She studied Theatre and Performance at Bard College and the National Theater Institute at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center. Payton is most interested in exploring/challenging/playing with the power of the finite across all things live arts. Recent Philadelphia collaborations have included Pig Iron Theatre Company, Nichole Canuso Dance Company, Annie Wilson, Alex Tatarsky, Bearded Ladies Cabaret, Philly Children's Theatre, and Urban Movement Arts. www.paytonsmith.com



BARBARIC YAWP WORKSHOP

Masks

Barbaric Yawp Workshop is the artistic collaboration of husband and wife duo Kasidy Devlin & Natalie Kropf, specializing in mask making, theatre creation, and storytelling inspired by folklore and mythology. Kasidy trained as a mask maker and performer in Orvieto, Italy and at the Dell'Arte International School of Physical Theatre. He is the longest running Sir Robin in Monty Python's Spamalot history, having toured with the Broadway production on and off for 10 years. Natalie has a degree in Acting from Cornell College, and has performed in off Broadway theatres such as the Public Theatre, the Culture Project, the Vineyard Theatre, and the Signature Theatre. Natalie and Kasidy married in 2018, and founded Barbaric Yawp Workshop in 2021, with its inaugural mask making project 'Jack and Jill' in collaboration with British poet Thomas Sharp. www.barbaricyawpworkshop.com



EMMIE PARKER

Stage Manager

Emmie Parker is a Theatre Artist, Performer and Educator in the Philadelphia area. She is a creative problem solver who loves finding order in chaos. Additionally she works as a Wardrobe Supervisor, performer or Teaching Artist at companies like Pig Iron, Arden, Quintessence, Delaware Theatre Company, Theatre Horizon, Delaware Shakespeare, Arcadia University and Wolf Performing Arts center. Emmie received a BFA in Acting from Arcadia University.

SYNOPSIS

Part climate-catastrophe, part clown show—

KOAL is a one-woman performance for the end of the world.

As wildfires tear through Australia, a baby koala, a coal miner and an Indigenous girl desperately strive to hold onto their homes before all burns and turns to ash.

KOAL is an interactive solo-show, performed by Jacinta Yelland and directed by Trey Lyford, that immerses the audience in the middle of the 2019 Australian bushfires.

The show follows two eyewitnesses to this climate catastrophe; Koal, a baby koala recovering at a wildlife sanctuary after being severely burned, and Stevo, a career coal-miner trapped in a collapsed mine hundreds of metres underground.

Woven throughout is the story of Minah, an Indigenous girl who was removed from her home and interned by her government during WWII.

Using documentary theatre, clown, and audience interaction, KOAL takes the audience from laughter to tears as it explores what is lost when your home is erased.



ABOUT THE SHOW

Written by	Length	Themes	Performance Styles	Suitability
Jacinta Yelland & Trey Lyford	70mins	Australian History, First Nations Perspectives, Colonialism, Climate Change, Australian Bushfires, Identity, Coal Mining, Natural World, Environmental Conservation, Indigenous Voice, Torres Strait Islander Culture, Relationships, Empathy	Physical Theatre, Clown, Devised Theatre, Contemporary Theatre, Theatre of Social Comment, Documentary Drama, Monologue, Mask, Expressionism, Solo Show, Audience Interaction, Flashbacks / Flashforwards, Multiple Role Playing, Mime, Original Music	Years 5-12

WHY WE MADE KOAL



by Jacinta Yelland, co-creator and original performer of KOAL

In 2019, I sat helplessly in my living room in Philadelphia, USA, watching my homeland, Australia, burn. Images of animals on fire, hellish red skies, and flames consuming native trees filled my screen. The landscapes and creatures I grew up revering were turning to ash before my eyes and I could do nothing to stop it.

Thirty-three people lost their lives, and around 65,000 were displaced. But the number that broke me was three billion: the estimated count of animals—mammals, birds, reptiles—killed or displaced. This doesn't include the tens of millions of hectares of forests and flora also destroyed, ecosystems devastated, and countless species struggling to recover. I couldn't help but wonder what stories and histories disappeared with them. Overcome with grief, I began creating a one-woman show with Trey Lyford (co-creator and director) as a call to action, urging us to protect the natural world, our shared home, for generations to come, both human and more-than-human.

In searching for the story, I felt compelled to decentre humans and instead illuminate the rich natural world that exists alongside us with the hope that audiences might not just witness it, but *feel* it. Over two and a half years, Trey and I collaborated directly with nature to translate the stories of the more-than-human world onto the stage. Native trees, bugs, shrubs, grasses—even the ash from a campfire—and, of course, the koala, became active ensemble members, each contributing their distinct scents, textures, personalities, and energies to the work.

Three distinct human characters emerged from our explorations, each offering a different way of perceiving, engaging, and communicating with the natural world. Curtis, a passionate wildlife guardian, experiences nature as intelligent, expressive, and sensuous. Minah, a young Indigenous girl from Waiben based on my late grandmother, lives in deep communion with the land until that bond is violently ruptured. Stevo, a veteran coal miner, is embedded in the Earth, his livelihood dependent on its destruction.

This creative journey has deepened my appreciation, admiration, and awe of nature, while fueling my commitment to protect it. I hope that KOAL rekindles audiences' relationship with the more-than-human world, encouraging them to see it not as something separate or distant from us, but as something immediate, magical, alive, and worth fighting for.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

by **Trey Lyford, co-creator and original director of KOAL**

On a typically cool evening in 1999, I came out of a rehearsal to see one of the most ominous sights of my life. The mountains above the University of California, San Diego, were glowing.

The hills surrounding Palomar Mountain were silhouetted, coal-black against the molten red treeline, as wildfires tore through the forests of the nearby La Jolla Reservation. For weeks afterward, we could smell the smoldering woods in our dressing rooms and theater. Sadly, this experience has grown way too familiar. Each year, we see more and more lives disrupted and destroyed by the power of nature's call - a resounding call that has been trying to sound the alarm for years.

More than a decade later, I was on a hike in Philadelphia's Wissahickon Park with my once student, now friend and collaborator, Jacinta Yelland. We were discussing the intricacies of creating original work and the loveliness of the trails when she nervously turned to me and asked me to collaborate on her new one-woman show. My first thought was, "Why is she nervous?" I forget how to make a show every single time I try, so why would she worry about asking me? My second thought was how lucky I felt to be invited to collaborate with someone I enjoyed and respected so dearly.

These two moments differ. The one in California (and now Australia, LA, Canada . . .) was a vision of the great threat that dominates our contemporary human moment, the other was an inquiry filled with hope, joy, giddiness, and fun. And yet, they belong together. How do we creatively engage with a story we have heard so many times before? Many of us have seen countless ominous shows and articles about climate change. So many, in fact, that as a society we are often paralyzed by fear and doubt. But Jacinta's invitation to me, a clown teacher and performer, led to a show filled with stupidity, humor, and love. We found comedy and imperfect humanity at the heart of the narrative. That is KOAL's greatest achievement - to tell the necessary tale, but to provide the much needed space for positive possibility. Yes, climate change is scary, and we need to keep shouting the truth as much as we can, but I hope we can challenge ourselves to find new ways to surprise our audiences, to help them hear the call anew. Laughter has great power. It breaks the rhythm and disrupts the narrative. Maybe using comedy, we can encourage new, innovative paths toward action and change. As storytellers, we get to discover ways to plant clues through the forest. And like Curtis does in the show, I hope we all learn to follow the koala poo to find our way out.

CURRICULUM LINKS

Australian Curriculum v9.0 (Years 7–10)

The Arts – Drama

The performance and accompanying learning activities align with the Australian Curriculum v9.0 through The Arts: Drama, supporting students to explore how theatre communicates meaning, represents lived experience, and invites reflection on social and cultural realities.

Students engage with:

- Dramatic forms, performance styles, and conventions
- Collaboration, interpretation, and critical response
- Contemporary Australian theatre practices, including physical and ensemble-based approaches

Through viewing, discussion, and practical activities, students analyse how drama can be used to communicate personal and collective stories, and how theatrical choices shape audience understanding and emotional response.

Direct curriculum links (v9.0):

- Exploring and applying dramatic forms, styles, and conventions to communicate meaning
- Analysing and responding to live performance
- Understanding how drama reflects and engages with social and cultural contexts

History

The performance connects with the History learning area by inviting students to engage with Australian history through lived experience, memory, and storytelling.

Students are supported to:

- Consider how historical events and policies have shaped people's lives and communities
- Explore multiple perspectives and voices in Australian history
- Reflect on how history is remembered, represented, and shared

Rather than focusing on factual recall, the performance encourages historical inquiry, empathy, and critical reflection, supporting students to think about the human impact of historical and contemporary events.

Direct curriculum links (Australian Curriculum v9.0):

- Examining historical perspectives and interpretations
- Understanding continuity and change in Australian history
- Developing historical empathy and reflective inquiry

General Capabilities

The performance and learning activities support the development of the following Australian Curriculum v9.0 General Capabilities:

- Critical and Creative Thinking
- Ethical Understanding
- Intercultural Understanding
- Personal and Social Capability
- Literacy

Cross-curriculum Priorities

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures
- Sustainability

PRE SHOW DISCUSSION

THE YARNING CIRCLE

A Yarning Circle is a traditional Indigenous Australian practice where people sit together in a circle to share stories, knowledge, experiences and feelings.

- The circle arrangement is important. Sitting in a circle emphasizes equality: everyone is on the same level, no one is “at the front,” and each person has an equal opportunity to speak and to be heard.
- Yarning (that is, storytelling or conversational sharing) has traditionally been a way for Indigenous communities to pass on cultural knowledge, histories, values, and life lessons across generations.
- It is also a safe, respectful space: people speak from the heart, listen without judgment, and honour each other’s stories. Silence and reflection can be as meaningful as speech in this context.

Because of these qualities, Yarning Circles are often used not only in traditional community settings, but also in schools, community events, and even in contemporary institutions — adapted as a way to encourage respectful dialogue, cultural sharing, and mutual understanding. Learn more [here](#).

Use this format for your group discussion.



PRE SHOW DISCUSSION STARTERS

1. What does the title of the play make you think it will be about?
2. The performance is presented by one actor playing multiple roles.
 - What challenges do you think this might involve?
 - How might the performer succeed in making each character feel different?
3. Looking at the promotional image for the show, what words, ideas, or themes come to mind?
4. What does the idea of “home” mean to you?
5. How do you think it would feel to be forced to leave your home and not be allowed to return?
6. What makes up your sense of identity?
 - Think about experiences, culture, relationships, or place.
7. Who do you consider to be part of your community, and why?

THEMES

CHERBOURG ABORIGINAL SETTLEMENT

Cherbourg Aboriginal Settlement was located in the lands of the Wakka Wakka people, near the town of Murgon in South East Queensland.

It began in 1899 when Salvation Army worker William Thompson established Barambah Mission.



Cherbourg, Current Day
Credit: hradcanska

Why was this settlement created?

In 1904, the Queensland Government took control of the settlement, and under the Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from many different language groups and regions from Queensland and northern New South Wales were forcibly relocated there. Between 1905 and 1939, more than 2,000 removals were recorded.

Who was in charge and how was daily life controlled?

Government authorities controlled almost every part of daily life on the settlement including the languages people could speak, the food and clothing they received, where they lived, where they worked, and even who they were allowed to marry.

People brought to Barambah (later renamed Cherbourg Aboriginal Settlement in 1931) were housed either in camps or in the settlement's dormitory system. The dormitories separated children, men, and women from their families, and strict rules were enforced. Breaking these rules often resulted in harsh punishment, including being jailed on the settlement or being sent to other government reserves, such as Taroom, Palm Island or Woorabinda.

The dormitory system at Cherbourg was not dismantled until the late 1970s.



Girls Dormitory, Palm Island
Credit: Queensland Government

Traditional Life Before Relocation

Before relocation, Aboriginal people in the region traditionally lived from the land, hunting animals such as kangaroo, wallaby, goanna, proc (echidna), snake, and fish, and gathering native fruits, roots, seeds, and leaves. Living in the confined space of the settlement meant that hunting and gathering was no longer possible.



Struggle to Keep Culture & Identity

It was difficult to keep their culture alive in this new environment. Many elders passed away without passing on tribal rites and lore. Their languages, customs and beliefs were lost as Government policies forced Aboriginal people to give up their identity and assimilate into dominant society.

However, they strove to keep as much of their identity alive as possible. One of the most important features of Cherbourg was the corroboree grounds. The superintendent viewed corroborees as a harmless pastime that would not hinder the “civilising” process and assumed they would eventually die out.

Although the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people learned European-style dancing and songs, the activities within the corroboree grounds allowed them to express their culture freely and without fear.

World War Two

During World War II, 19 men from Cherbourg enlisted and served in the Australian Armed forces. Around 200 citizens were forcibly evacuated from Waiben (Thursday Island) in the Torres Strait and relocated to Cherbourg including Jacinta’s grandmother.

Movement Toward Self Governance

In 1986, Cherbourg was established as a Deed of Grant in Trust (DOGIT) community, and by 1991 the community elected its first independent Cherbourg Council.

Today, Cherbourg is a strong and active community with a distinct culture and identity, and is home to around 2,000 Aboriginal residents.

POST-SHOW DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How did policies and restrictions shown in the performance attempt to reshape or suppress the identities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples?
 - Which scenes or moments from the show highlighted this most clearly?
2. What role did storytelling, song, dance, and shared cultural practices play in maintaining identity and connection for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples?
3. The performance shows both loss and resilience.
 - Where did you see moments of cultural strength, survival, or resistance?
4. How did the restrictions placed on people’s lives affect their sense of home, belonging, and community?
5. Was there a moment in the performance that challenged or deepened your understanding of the histories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples?
 - Why did this moment stand out to you?
6. How can learning about these histories help us better understand contemporary issues affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities today?

THE 2019-2020 AUSTRALIAN BUSHFIRES

The Black Summer bushfires were one of the worst natural disasters in Australian history. They began in mid-2019 and continued through early 2020, much earlier and longer than a normal fire season.

Fires burned across much of Australia, especially in New South Wales and Victoria, but also in Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania and the Northern Territory.

How big were the fires?

The fires were massive in scale and intensity. Around 17–24 million hectares of land were burned. Some fires joined together to form extremely large “mega-fires” that burned for weeks and were very difficult to control.

Credit: [New Matilda](#)



Impact on people and communities

The bushfires had devastating effects on communities:

- Thick smoke covered cities, causing hazardous air quality in places like Sydney and Melbourne
- At least 33 people died directly because of the fires
- Around 3,000 homes were destroyed
- Many towns were forced to evacuate and approx. 65,000 people were displaced

These fires affected people’s health, homes, jobs and mental wellbeing, as well as damaging local economies.



Credit: [New Matilda](#)

Impact on wildlife and the environment

- The environmental damage was catastrophic:
- Millions of hectares of forests and bushland were destroyed
- Scientists estimate 1–3 billion native animals were killed or displaced
- Many natural habitats and ecosystems were lost
- Carbon were released into the atmosphere, contributing to climate change
- Long-term damage to ecosystems and biodiversity is still being felt



Credit: [Calistemon](#)

POST-SHOW DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What theatrical choices (such as movement, sound, lighting, set, or ensemble work) were used to communicate the scale, intensity, or impact of the 2019–2020 bushfires in KOAL?
- How did the performance represent the effects of the bushfires on people, communities, animals, and the environment?
 - Which moments or images stood out to you most strongly?
- In what ways did KOAL invite the audience to think about the emotional and psychological impact of bushfires, both during the event and in the aftermath?
- How did the performance encourage reflection on the long-term effects of bushfires and their connection to climate change?
- Did the bushfire scenes prompt you to think differently about resilience, responsibility, or care for place?
 - Why or why not?
- How can theatre be an effective way to communicate complex environmental issues, such as bushfires and climate change, to an audience?

AMPLIFYING THE VOICES OF THE NATURAL WORLD

The Impact of Climate Change on the More-Than-Human World

Climate change is having serious effects on plants, animals, and entire ecosystems. Rising temperatures, extreme weather events, droughts, and habitat loss are threatening the survival of many species, from koalas, sea turtles and orangutans to native trees and wetlands.



Nature is Sentient

According to philosopher and ecologist David Abram, the more-than-human world—animals, plants, and even the land itself—are sentient and sensitive beings that feel the effects of human actions. This means that the environmental damage caused by climate change is not just abstract or distant; it directly affects the lives, wellbeing, and experiences of these living beings. Recognising the more-than-human world as sentient reminds us that our choices have ethical and emotional consequences for all forms of life, not just humans.

How did KOAL work with Nature?

In developing KOAL, the creative team sought to decentre humans from the narrative and make the natural world visible and *felt* by audiences. They wondered what animals, rocks, rivers, and trees might say about the human-made crisis threatening their existence, and committed to treating nature as an active participant in the story. This approach began at the source: direct engagement with nature during Fresh Ground Pepper's Eco Week at Little Pond in Nazareth, Pennsylvania.

The weeklong residency, which brings together eco-conscious artists to collaborate with nature, required the creators to slow down, attune to nature's rhythms, and listen. Native trees, shrubs, seeds, grasses, and even campfire ash became collaborators, offering their own scents, textures, personalities, and energies. Allowing the natural environment to guide both content and structure proved transformative, resulting in a more authentic and embodied representation of nature on stage in KOAL.

As the legendary conservationist Steve Irwin said,
"If I can't get animals into people's hearts,
there will be no conservation."



POST-SHOW DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How did the show portray the natural world as more than just a backdrop?
- How did the production help you imagine the perspective of wildlife or the land?
- How did KOAL invite you to think about your relationship to the environment?
- What ways did the show use human characters to help you connect with the natural world?

COAL MINING IN AUSTRALIA

Coal mining is the process of extracting coal, a type of fossil fuel, from the earth.

Coal is mainly used to produce electricity, power industries, and is also exported to other countries as an energy source. Australia is one of the world's largest coal exporters, and mining has historically been a major source of jobs and income, especially in regional areas.

Economic Importance

Coal mining has played a significant role in Australia's economy for more than a century, particularly in regions such as Queensland and New South Wales. Coal has been used domestically for electricity generation and exported globally, creating jobs and economic stability for many regional communities.



Credit: Max Phillips

Environmental Impacts

Coal mining has major environmental impacts. Open-cut and underground mines contribute to land clearing, habitat loss, water pollution, and high levels of carbon emissions, which are closely linked to climate change. Coal combustion is one of the largest sources of greenhouse gases, accelerating global warming and increasing the frequency of extreme weather events such as bushfires, floods, and heatwaves.

Mine Closures and Community Impacts

In recent years, many coal mines have closed or announced closure timelines due to climate commitments, market changes, and the global shift to renewable energy. While these closures are seen as essential for environmental protection, they have created significant challenges for mining communities. Towns built around mines often experience job losses, population decline, financial strain, and identity shifts when major employers shut down. Many experts now advocate for "just transition" policies, which are approaches that aim to support workers and communities through retraining, economic diversification, and long-term planning so that environmental progress does not come at the cost of human wellbeing.



Credit: John Englart

POST-SHOW DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do you think the idea of "home" means to people who have lived in coal mining communities for generations?
 - In what ways is this similar to, or different from, what *home* means to you?
2. What were your first impressions of Stevo?
 - How did his actions, voice, or physicality help communicate his life and experiences as a coal miner?
3. Which moments in KOAL made you feel closest to Stevo or helped you understand his perspective more deeply?
4. How did the performance represent the relationship between coal mining, work, and community identity?
5. How does including a coal miner's point of view add complexity to conversations about climate change and environmental responsibility?
6. Did Stevo's story challenge or shift your thinking about coal mining in Australia?
 - Why or why not?

STYLISTIC INFLUENCES

The creators of KOAL used a range of theatrical influences to create an original work of theatre.

PHYSICAL THEATRE

Physical theatre is a form of storytelling that communicates primarily through the body rather than spoken text. Performers use movement, gesture, rhythm, and spatial awareness to build meaning, often drawing on play, ensemble work, and mask or character exploration. Instead of beginning with a script, the material commonly grows out of improvisation, where a group experiments with images, actions, and structured physical tasks. These discoveries are then shaped into a clear movement vocabulary that carries the story.

Character creation is also physical: each figure is defined by their own rhythm, weight, tempo, posture, and dynamic qualities. This allows performers to shift between roles with precision and clarity, relying on strong physical awareness and control. In creating KOAL, the artists drew on techniques such as Jacques Lecoq's animal study, an exercise that involves observing an animal's breath, posture, and behavior to develop the koala's physical presence onstage.



Drawing on training and influences from companies like The Civilians, rainpan 43, Zen Zen Zo Physical Theatre, Philippe Gaulier, and Pig Iron Theatre Company, the creators of KOAL used physical theatre to translate complex themes like climate change, ecological loss, the internment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and scientific data into movement-driven imagery that feels immediate, emotional, and visually expressive for audiences.



POST-SHOW DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In what ways did the performer use their body to bring the world of KOAL to life?
2. Can you describe a moment in KOAL where physical movement communicated an emotion or idea more clearly than words?
 - What made this moment effective?
3. How did the use of physical storytelling affect your engagement with the performance as an audience member?
4. What were the key physical differences between the characters played by the same actor?
 - Consider posture, movement quality, rhythm, gesture, or use of space.
5. How did physical theatre help communicate complex ideas or themes within the performance?

DOCUMENTARY THEATRE

Documentary Theatre is a form of performance that uses real-world materials such as interviews, testimony, archival documents, and media records to construct a dramatic work. The goal is to bring lived experience and contemporary events to the stage.

The creators of documentary theatre assemble these factual materials to create a narrative or argument. These materials may be edited, juxtaposed, or shaped dramaturgically, giving artists space to interpret events while maintaining a grounding in documented reality.

Influential examples include:

- *The Laramie Project* (2000) by Moisés Kaufman and the Tectonic Theater Project, which combines interviews, journals, and reportage
- Anna Deavere Smith's *Fires in the Mirror* (1992) and *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* (1994), which blend interviews, public speeches, and transcripts
- Peter Weiss's *The Investigation* (1965), which draws directly from the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trials.



Laramie Project
Credit: [Otterbein College](#)

Artists must navigate how to honor personal narratives, how much editorial shaping is appropriate, and how to avoid re-traumatizing or misrepresenting participants. When done well, documentary theatre creates a space where audiences encounter complex realities with immediacy, nuance, and emotional proximity, often prompting civic dialogue and social reflection.

The KOAL creators worked with news articles, footage and photography, documentaries, interviews and text books to ensure historical references were accurate.

POST-SHOW DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What distinguishes documentary theatre from traditional scripted drama?
 - Why might artists choose to work with real interviews, documents, or testimonies?
2. How does the use of verbatim or documentary text affect an audience's perception of authenticity and truth?
3. Why can documentary theatre be particularly effective when exploring social injustice, political conflict, or marginalised voices?
4. In what ways does presenting real stories differ from fictional storytelling in terms of emotional impact and audience responsibility?
5. How does *KOAL* use elements of documentary theatre to explore its themes?
 - Consider text, structure, performance style, or use of real-world material.
6. In *KOAL*, whose voices are heard, and whose voices are missing?
 - How does this reflect common critiques or limitations of documentary theatre?

DEVISED THEATRE

Devised theatre is a collaborative way of making performance that typically doesn't start with a written script. Instead, the performers and creative team build the show together from scratch. The process often includes theatre games, improvisation, movement exploration, and blending different art forms such as sound, video, puppetry, or dance with plenty of space for experimenting with ideas and storytelling styles.

Modern devised theatre is often associated with the experimental ensembles of the 1960s and 70s in the UK and US, but its roots run much deeper. Its lineage can be traced to Commedia dell'arte, where 16th-century Italian performers built scenes through improvisation rather than a fixed script. Later innovators including Jerzy Grotowski's Poor Theatre expanded these principles, emphasizing physical exploration, ensemble collaboration, and direct engagement with social and political issues.

Two (of Many) Approaches to Devised Theatre

No two companies devise in the same way, but the final result is usually co-authored, meaning everyone contributes to making the show.

1. *Ensemble-Led*: In ensemble-led devising, everyone shares responsibility for creating the material. There is no single leader resulting in a performance shaped by multiple viewpoints and voices.
2. *Lead Artist*: One person takes on the role of Lead Artist who initiates the project and guides the ensemble by bringing in research, leading discussions, and setting creative tasks.

Roles in the Creation of KOAL

Jacinta Yelland served as the Lead Artist. Both Jacinta and Trey Lyford co-authored the work, generating and shaping the material together, while Trey also took on the role of director, providing the essential outside eye needed to structure and refine the final performance.

KOAL's Devising Process

Research Phase: Jacinta and Trey spent a year researching the content of the show through interviews, reading books, articles and studies, and going on field trips. This research formed the foundation for the creative development of KOAL.

Rehearsal, Experimentation and Crafting:

They then spent 1.5 years in the rehearsal room developing the show. They used Tectonic Theatre's *moment work*, Anne Bogart's *viewpoints* and *composition work*, improvisation, Jacques Lecoq's *animal study*, writing prompts and many other techniques to generate material and shape it into the final product. This work was presented at several work-in-progress showings where they received feedback from their peers.



Koala research in the rehearsal room versus on stage.

POST-SHOW DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why might artists choose devising rather than working from a traditional script when exploring contemporary issues or personal experiences?
2. What creative, interpersonal, and technical skills do performers develop through the devising process?
3. Describe a moment when collaboration helped strengthen or improve an idea in a group project that you were involved in either in theatre or another learning context.
4. What strategies can help you stay open to other people's ideas, even when they differ from your own?

CLOWN & COMEDY

Clown is a performance style grounded in play, simplicity, and direct connection with the audience. It emphasizes impulse, vulnerability, and the performer's relationship with failure, joy, and surprise. Characters emerge through exaggerated physicality, clear emotional expression, and an openness to respond authentically to the moment rather than relying on scripted realism.

At its core, the clown is the one who “flops”, the figure who tries, fails, and tries again. This willingness to fail publicly reveals a deeply human truth that can move an audience as much as it makes them laugh. Clowning comes alive through active engagement with spectators, building a shared sense of discovery and complicity.



The Power of Comedy

A show about the consequences of climate change can easily become extremely bleak. Julie Felise Dubiner, the dramaturg of *Between Two Knees* by Native American sketch comedy group the 1491s, tells the story of a study where one group of people watched a tragic movie about injustice and another group saw a movie about the same injustice but as a comedy. The first group felt sad and defeated, while the latter group felt energized to do something to change the situation and they did! KOAL is infused with comedic moments—it's billed as a clown show—ranging from Curtis's wild and goofy personality to Stevo the Coal Miner's playful banter with the audience. Comedy gave the creators a fun and engaging way to connect with viewers, provide relief from confronting heavy themes, and inspire action through humor. Comedy, after all, is an act of defiance and empowerment. As Dubiner writes “It declares for those who have survived...a state of being alive, of living-ness. It declares, “We are still here.””

Clowning & Presence in KOAL

Clowning and the red nose (or, in KOAL's case, a black nose for koala explorations) are effective tools for accessing the raw presence, curiosity, and vulnerability of an animal. Clowning demands a profound level of presence and sincerity, requiring you to be completely open and attuned to yourself, your audience, and your surroundings, much like a wild creature in its natural state.

POST SHOW DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What techniques does KOAL use to create humour, and how do these techniques help explore a serious topic such as climate change?
2. Which moments in the performance made you laugh, and why were they effective?
3. In which moments did humour help you feel more connected to the characters' experiences or struggles?
4. How did the shifts between comic and serious moments affect your emotional response as an audience member?

POST SHOW ACTIVITIES

ACTIVITY #1: YARNING CIRCLE REFLECTION

- What are the key messages of KOAL?
- What character had the greatest impact on you and why?
- Did the play end as you predicted? Why / why not?
- Did KOAL make you think about “home” differently?
- How did KOAL affect your feelings about the natural world?
- What emotions or memories did KOAL bring up for you about bushfires?
- How can creative works (theatre, art, writing) help preserve memories, culture, and identity?
- What responsibilities come with witnessing these stories?

ACTIVITY #2: DOCUMENTARY THEATRE

In small groups collect material from at least three real, verifiable sources that directly connect to KOAL’s themes of loss of home, community, or identity. Your sources may explore topics such as urban displacement, forced migration due to conflict or political instability, suppression of cultural/individual expression, loss of language or cultural heritage etc.

Create a sequence of three tableaux (frozen stage pictures) that physically interpret your chosen sources. Each tableau should:

- Include all group members in a clear, intentional physical arrangement
- Include one line of spoken text drawn directly from your source material (if applicable)
- Be bold, expressive, and visually clear in communicating emotion and theme
- Reflect KOAL’s core ideas: loss of home, loss of community, or loss of identity

ACTIVITY #3: THE VOICES OF THE MORE-THAN-HUMAN WORLD

Select a non-human entity that has been affected by climate change (e.g. a specific tree, an insect, soil, water). Create a 1-2 minute movement or spoken-word piece where the non-human voice responds to real climate events.

Examples:

- Monologue from the perspective of a tree witnessing displacement or experiencing a flood
- Ensemble movement showing the ash from the fires traveling to other cities and countries
- Soundscape of non-human voices “remembering” their histories

ACTIVITY #4: CLOWNING WITH NATURE FACTS

Inspired by Curtis the Wildlife Guardian, pick an animal or other more-than-human entity that you do not know much about. Research fun and peculiar facts about them and create a short comical presentation in the style of Curtis’ enthusiastic and energetic wildlife presentation. Here’s a jumping off point - the bird-dung spider!



REFERENCES & FURTHER READING

[Cherbourg - Queensland Government](#)
[The Ration Shed Museum](#)

[Forest Fire Data - Forests Australia](#)
[Understanding The Fires - NSW Government](#)
[Australia's Black Summer - Friends Of The Earth](#)
[Australia Bushfire Final Report - World Wildlife Fund](#)

[What Do Coal Miners Think About Climate Change - VICE/Kim Nguyen](#)

[Amplifying The Voices of The Natural World Through Theatre](#)
[- HowlRound Theatre Commons](#)

WAYS YOU CAN HELP

One of the most powerful things you can do is get involved — there are many paths depending on how much time, energy and passion you have:

- **Volunteer your time:** Help out on-the-ground with habitat restoration, clean-ups, tree planting, wildlife care, or citizen-science projects.
- **Become a member or supporter:** Join as a member to stay informed, attend events, and support advocacy efforts.
- **Donate:** Even small financial contributions help organisations maintain vital conservation, education, and restoration work.
- **Educate yourself and others:** Learn about local environmental issues, join community groups, and support local efforts.

Here are examples of environmental organisations you might explore. Their focus ranges from urban conservation to coastal protection to wildlife care.

Queensland

- [QLD Koala Society](#)
- [QLD Koala Curaders](#)
- [Gecko Environmental Council](#)
- [Wildlife Queensland](#)

New South Wales

- [Koalas in Care](#)
- [FAWNA NSW](#)

Tasmania

- [Wildcare Tasmania](#)
- [City of Hobart Bushcare](#)

Western Australia

- [Mandurah Wildlife Rehabilitation Centre](#)
- [Mandurah Environment and Heritage Group](#)

Australia

- [Australia Wildlife Conservancy](#)
- [Wildcare Australia](#)

