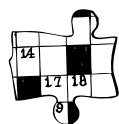


What I Wrote: Louis Nowra



A **STUDY GUIDE** BY KATY MARRINER



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Introduction

This study guide to accompany *What I Wrote: Louis Nowra* has been written for senior secondary students. It provides information and suggestions for learning activities in English, Literature, Theatre Studies and Drama.

What I Wrote: Louis Nowra is a short film about Australian playwright Louis Nowra. Dr Tess Brady interviews Nowra and provides a critical introduction to *The Golden Age*, *Cosi*, *Radiance*, *Language of the Gods* and *The Boyce Trilogy*. *What I Wrote: Louis Nowra* also includes a discussion of many of Nowra's other plays and an investigation of his approach to writing.

What I Wrote: Louis Nowra is one title from a four-part series spotlighting Australian playwrights. The series offers students information about the ideas and processes of the playwrights, as well as the opportunity to hear what the playwrights have to say about their work. Other titles available in the *What I Wrote* series include:

- *What I Wrote: Matt Cameron*
- *What I Wrote: Hannie Rayson*
- *What I Wrote: Katherine Thomson*

Further information about the series can be found at <<http://www.whatiwrote.com.au>>.

Louis Nowra

Louis Nowra was born Mark Doyle on 12 December 1950. He changed his name to Louis Nowra in the early 1970s. Nowra studied at Melbourne's La Trobe University but left before earning a degree. He worked at a variety of jobs until his plays began to attract attention in the mid 1970s.

Nowra is an acclaimed and prolific playwright who has changed the way Australians view theatre. The Nowra stage tends to show audiences the unexpected, as it explores his personal vision of complex concerns such as settlement, colonialism and dispossession. His early plays were set in remote times and places – eighteenth century Russia, nineteenth century Paraguay

and 1920s China, before his focus shifted to Australian events and personalities. Nowra's plays include *Inner Voices*, *Albert Names Edward*, *Visions*, *The Golden Age*, *Capricornia*, *Language of the Gods*, *Crow*, *The Incurruptible*, *The Boyce Trilogy*, *Radiance* and the semi-autobiographical *Summer of the Aliens* and *Cosi*.

While Nowra is known for his plays, he has also written four novels: *The Misery of Beauty*, *Palu*, *Red Nights* and *Abaza*. Nowra has written two memoirs *The Twelfth of Never* and *Shooting the Moon*. His non-fiction works include *The Cheated*, *Warne's World* and *Bad Dreaming*. Nowra's screenwriting credits include *Map of the Human Heart*, *The Matchmaker*, *Cosi*, *K-19: The Widowmaker*, *Heaven's Burning*, *Twisted Tales: Directly From My Heart to You*, *Black and White* and *Radiance*. Nowra has also held administrative positions in several theatre companies.

About the filmmakers

Dr Tess Brady – Presenter

Dr Tess Brady is a highly respected editor, researcher and teacher of writing at university level. She was the co-founding editor of the international online scholarly journal *TEXT* and has published children's picture books, adult radio drama, crime fiction, short stories and popular non-fiction. Her most recent publication is *Creative Writing: Theory beyond practice*, with Nigel Krauth.

Catherine Gough-Brady – Director

Catherine Gough-Brady is a documentary filmmaker. She has made works for a variety of media. Gough-Brady has produced and directed educational videos and web sites. Her 'docugame' *Docks Dispute* <<http://www.docksdispute.com>> is currently used in tertiary management and industrial relations courses.

Using *What I Wrote:* *Louis Nowra* in the classroom

Teachers may select from the following activities to support students' viewing and close analysis of *What I Wrote: Louis Nowra*.

The writer's context

'I'm a working-class boy who came from a housing commission estate.'
– Louis Nowra

- In *What I Wrote: Louis Nowra*, Nowra recalls his first experience of the theatre. When did you first visit the theatre to see what Nowra labels a 'straight play'?
- Nowra has not hesitated to use his own life as source material for his plays. Research the life and times of Nowra.
- Drawing on one of Nowra's plays, determine how Nowra's experience of and attitudes to the world in which he lives have influenced the construction of the text. Work in a small group to complete the analysis. Develop a PowerPoint presentation to communicate this information to the class.

The worlds of the plays

'I don't want to see worlds that similar to my own. I want a different world.'
– Louis Nowra

'I didn't want to be an Australian playwright. I wanted to be a world playwright.'

– Louis Nowra

- Nowra's plays offer locations from the exotic through to the suburban. Working in small groups, investigate the use of location in one of Nowra's plays. Present the results of your investigation to the class.
- 'There's not much naturalism in his world.'

– Dr Tess Brady

Naturalism is the re-creation of real life or life as it is onstage. It seeks to reproduce realistic characters, situations or conflicts and usually occurs in real time with sets, props and costumes that are representative of the situation, place or period. Drawing on one of Nowra's plays, find evidence to contribute to a discussion of Nowra's rejection of naturalism in favour of more non-naturalistic theatre.

- Nowra expresses his disapproval of 'cardigan dramas' in *What I Wrote: Louis Nowra*. He believes that theatre should not be commonplace but rather unusual and surprising. Nowra dresses his ideas carefully. Drawing on a Nowra play that you know well, discuss Nowra's decision to offer his audiences the spectacular, the quirky, the odd and the unexpected.

- What type of people do you meet in Nowra's plays?

Views and Values

'His overarching theme is the end of empire and he's fascinated with what happens to people when it all starts crumbling away.'

– Dr Tess Brady

'He asks who are we when everything is stripped away.'

– Dr Tess Brady

'Does art have to be relevant to the times?'

– Louis Nowra

- Drawing on *What I Wrote: Louis Nowra* and your knowledge of Nowra's plays, make a list of the ideas that Nowra has brought to audiences' attention.
- Use the internet, critical essays and commentaries to compile a detailed summary of the contexts that shape Nowra's work as a playwright. Discuss your findings with others in the class.
- *What I Wrote: Louis Nowra* claim that Nowra writes about the fall of empires. Is this true of the play that you are studying?
- Why do you think Nowra uses war as a platform to explore complex ideas and issues?



- Is it necessary for art to be relevant? What is Nowra's attitude to writing about contemporary events and politics?

Critical perspectives

- Use the internet, critical commentaries and reviews to arrive at a detailed knowledge and understanding of the critical reception of Nowra's writing. What viewpoints do you support? What viewpoints do you refute?

The Plays

The Golden Age

'At the core of *The Golden Age* is a plea for harmony.'

– Dr Tess Brady

The Golden Age is an epic play about two young hikers who discover a lost community in the forests of Tasmania. The tribe has developed its own culture and language during its time in the wilderness. Assimilation brings clashes with the culture and expectations of a modern Australia.

- William: And what material did he have? Criminals, retards, the lost, the desperate. [Smiling] So what we have before us is the true Australian culture.

What does *The Golden Age* have to say about Australian culture?

- 'A story of personal struggle, social limitations and most of all love.' Do you agree?
- Nowra's interest in language and the teaching of language was in part prompted by a childhood accident. He recollects the process of learning how to speak again in *What I Wrote: Louis Nowra*. As you view Brady's interview with Nowra, compile a list of statements that explain Nowra's interest in this subject.
- Were you surprised by Nowra's admission that the scathing reviews of *The Golden Age* caused him to stop reading reviews and to stop writing plays?

Così

It is 1971 and Lewis, a young director, agrees to stage a production of Mozart's *Così Fan Tutte* with a cast of patients from a mental institution. There is no orchestra, no one can sing and the theatre is nothing more than a burnt out shell. Beyond the walls of the institution, citizens march against their government's involvement in a war and Lewis' relationship falters. As the production lurches forward, Lewis realizes it doesn't hurt to be a little crazy.

- Poignant or hilarious? Endorse your interpretation with evidence from the play.
 - How does Nowra portray mental illness?
 - 'One of the virtues of the play is that you learn to love the characters.'
- Louis Nowra

Share your thoughts about the characters of *Così* with others in your class.

- By the end of the play, Lewis is no longer afraid of madness. Discuss.
- What was the nature of Australian society and its values in the 1970s? How do the characters in *Così* embody or react against the prevailing views and values of the time?
- View the film *Così* (Mark Joffe, 1996). Which version of *Così* do you prefer? Why?

Radiance

Radiance tells the story of three sisters who return to their childhood home on the eve of their mother's funeral. The sisters' bonds are complex and complicated because of the secrets and lies that are part of their past and present. Cressy, Mae and Nona's reunion is an occasion of grief, celebration and reconciliation.

- Brady claims that *Radiance* is 'a play of dreams'. Do you agree?
- *Radiance* is an irreverent tale of family intrigue. Discuss.

- *Radiance* was made into a feature film by Rachel Perkins in 1998. The screenplay was written by Nowra. Information about the film and reviews are available on the internet. Develop a detailed comparison of a scene from the play and the same scene in the film. Evaluate the effectiveness of the adaptation.

Language of the Gods

Nowra's *Language of the Gods* explores themes of decay, friendship, marriage and colonialism at the end of an empire. The play is set in Sulawesi in 1946. Dutch colonial rule is collapsing as the people's movement leads the country towards the establishment of an Indonesian republic. The Braak family are forced to confront the truth about their own lives and the legacy they will leave behind.

- The moment a westerner starts to believe in magic then he's lost something important. He begins to believe in omens and fate and loses the capacity to believe he himself can change things. That's how come we got where we are – the ability to believe we can change things, that we're not at the mercy of fate.

– Braak

Discuss the significance of this claim.

- 'Empires rise and fall but History goes on.' Is this Nowra's message in *Language of the Gods*?
- 'Balance is important in this play.' What does Brady mean?
- Why do you think Nowra shares the anecdote about the play's opening night?

The Boyce Trilogy

'Over my career I have been fascinated by the twilight of empires.'

– Louis Nowra

The Boyce Trilogy is the epic saga of the Boyce family, a family made wealthy through property development.

The trilogy begins with *The Woman with Dog's Eyes*. The Boyce family

gather to celebrate the parents' fortieth wedding anniversary. The play explores the universal themes of family, love and disappointment.

In *The Marvellous Boy*, the second part of the trilogy, the family's patriarch Malcolm Boyce is dying. Unfortunately the development that was going to make Malcolm's dream of immortality come true has become a nightmare. Desperate times require desperate measures.

In the final instalment of the trilogy, *The Emperor of Sydney*, the three sons fight for control of the company. The company is near bankruptcy because of the stalled project and a criminal investigation into their father's role in the suspicious death of the project's most outspoken critic. The question is, who will be The Emperor of Sydney?

- *The Boyce Trilogy* is really Luke's story. Do you agree?
- What does *The Boyce Trilogy* tell audiences about the end of an empire?
- Luke: I have to remember her, remember every single thing or else there is nothing.

How does Nowra shape your understanding of memory?

- *The Woman with Dog Eyes* is a play told in real time. There are no scene breaks. How does the structure of the play establish meaning and influence the audience's response to the drama?
- Drawing on pertinent quotations from *The Marvellous Boy*, generate a discussion of the play's significant themes.
- 'This is a play about grief and greed and manipulation.'

– Dr Tess Brady

Having read *The Emperor of Sydney* and researched the issues and ideas that drive the drama, do you agree with Brady's assessment of the play?

The Temple

- *The Temple* is another play by Nowra portraying the greed and excess of the corporate world. Laurie Blake is a former truckie and slaughterhouse owner turned entrepreneur. Nowra offers a ferocious and funny portrait of Blake, the takeover king of Australia. Conduct class readings of excerpts from the play.

Inner Voices and Albert Names Edward

Inner Voices and *Albert Names Edward* are plays preoccupied with isolation and power. Set in Russia, *Inner Voices* narrates the story of the son of Catherine the Great. Hidden away since childhood he assumes the throne knowing nothing more than his name.

In *Albert Names Edward* audiences can see the beginnings of Nowra's interest in memory and how memory makes a person who they are.

- Name the themes of these early plays. Use moments and statements from the plays to endorse your judgements.
- Most of Nowra's early work is more European than Australian in context. Find evidence to support this view.

Visions

Visions is set in Paraguay during the war of the Triple Alliance, the bloodiest conflict in Latin American history. Like many of Nowra's plays, *Visions* explores the inheritance of power and the fall of an empire. President Lynch's ignorance and Madame Lynch's egoism bring ruin.

- Does the audience actually need the final wrapping up of loose ends? Were you satisfied by the play's conclusion?
- In *Madame Lynch* we see the first of Nowra's strong female characters. Drawing on evidence from *Visions*, discuss Nowra's portrayal of Madame Lynch.

Capricornia

Xavier Herbert's classic novel of racial conflict in the Northern Territory during the 1930s was expertly dramatized by Nowra in the powerful and moving story of Norman's journey to the truth of his identity.

Nowra was given the difficult task of adapting a classic Australian novel to play. Turning the novel into a play created a series of problems. He offers his view of the adaptation process in the introduction to the published play.

- Find out more about Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia*.
- Read excerpts from Herbert's *Capricornia*. Compare the plot, setting, characters, themes and language of the excerpts with passages from the play.

Crow

'I was very interested in this never-give-in kind of mother-courage woman.'

– Louis Nowra

Crow has been fighting the government for years to win back a tin mine that is rightfully hers. Set in Darwin in 1942, Nowra reveals Crow's determination to challenge the racism that prevents Ab-origines from owning land. *Crow* is set at the fall of an empire. Darwin is being bombed. The empire of racist attitudes and outmoded laws is crumbling away.

- Do you like Crow?
- Do you think Crow is her own worst enemy?
- Brady describes Crow as 'a potent mixture of social injustice and a very determined character.' Do you think this is an apt assessment of the play?

Summer of the Aliens

It is 1962, and while the world is worried about the Cuban Missile Crisis, fourteen-year-old Lewis is preoccupied by flying saucers. *Summer of the Aliens* is the account of the events and relationships that shape his emerging sense of self. Told without sentimentality, Lewis' story is one of wonder and



terror as he comes to terms with the angels and aliens within us all.

- 'Without memory we are nothing.'

What does *The Summer of the Aliens* tell an audience about the relationship between memory and identity?

- What are the underlying messages of *Summer of the Aliens*?
- In *Summer of the Aliens*, Nowra asks the audience to reflect on how society constantly changes and evolves but at the same time stays the same. Do you agree?
- Working as a class, research the Cuban Missile Crisis and how it shaped the society of the time. Why does Nowra draw on this context?

The Incorruptible

'*The Incorruptible* is a play about country and land and politics.'

– Dr Tess Brady

Ion Stafford is made Premier of Queensland but he makes himself Prime Minister of Australia. He turns the tables on those who think they can control him and starts his own crusade for ultimate power. His single mindedness creates corruption and chaos.

- *The Incorruptible* is Nowra's 'Pauline Hanson' play. Research Pauline Hanson and One Nation. Why do you think Nowra felt compelled to write a 'Pauline Hanson' play?
 - 'Another play about power and corruption and the end of empires.'
- Dr Tess Brady

What moments and statements in *The Incorruptible* show Brady's evaluation to be true?

- Brady dislikes the conclusion of *The Incorruptible*. Do you find it an effective end?

The writing process

'I want to be thrilled.'

– Louis Nowra

'I like audiences to be shocked occasionally.'

– Louis Nowra

'I do want the audience to walk out and go "that was an interesting play".'

– Louis Nowra

- Nowra acknowledges his own writing has been influenced by the works of the Greek and Elizabethan playwrights. Research the theatre of these periods. Create an A4 document that offers an engaging profile of the selected period.
- What other playwrights does Nowra name as significant influences? Find out more about one of these playwrights.
- Drawing on Nowra's statements in *What I Wrote: Louis Nowra*, discuss

how he creates and structures the drama.

- What is Nowra's opinion of drama-turges?

- 'My texts are a bit more open than they used to be in rehearsal.'

– Louis Nowra

'With a new play, the intense relationship has to be triangular. It has to be writer, director and actors.'

– Louis Nowra

What is Nowra's view of the rehearsal process?

- Were you surprised to learn that Nowra does not see a play after its premiere?
- There are a lot of fires in Nowra's plays. What other images dominate Nowra's writing? Why does Nowra rely on such images?
- Nowra offers his best writing tips in *What I Wrote: Louis Nowra*. What tip do you think you will follow?

Analytic responses

The following topics could be used for written text responses, debates, panel discussions and online forums.

- 'Louis Nowra loathes anything to do with relevance.' Discuss the validity of this claim by drawing on one of Nowra's plays.
- 'Nowra's plays are more often than not a plea for tolerance.' Do you agree?
- Nowra's theatre is preoccupied by themes of invasion, adaptation, resistance and renewal. Develop a detailed discussion of one of these themes with reference to a Nowra play that you know well.

From script to stage

- Create and present a short solo performance from one of Nowra's plays. Submit a short written report that describes and analyses the processes used to create and present the performance.



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