



Photo: Alex Brenner

**THEATRE / UK & FRANCE**

# Palmyra

**Bertrand Lesca and Nasi Voutsas**

**Education Resources**

55 minutes no interval

Suitable for Year 10 students onwards

Compiled by Kimberley Martin, December 2018

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Arts Curriculum subjects, English and areas covered and relevant IB subjects  
*Suggested curriculum links presented in following colours:*

### **ACARA**

Drama  
English

### **SACE**

Drama  
English

### **IB**

Arts  
Individuals and Societies  
Language and Literature

### **CAPABILITIES:**

Literacy and numeracy come in many forms – non-verbal, visual and embodied, the Arts provide opportunities for students to deepen their literate and numerate experiences. Viewing and experiencing performance requires Critical and Creative Thinking, and challenges Personal & Social viewpoints and Ethical Understandings.

## **Content Warnings**

Mild onstage violence: there is a scuffle and pushing around.  
The strong language is limited to a few "f\*\*\*s" within the dialogue

## **Note for teachers**

**\*\*The following information is provided FOR YOUR INFORMATION ONLY; for obvious reasons, we would request that you do not explicitly warn students/audiences about this before the production.\*\***

**The show involves periods of dialogue/interaction with the audience. In the first half of the show this is mostly 'direct address': people are asked whether they can see things, and a series of simple questions – "Do you agree? What do you think? Is that right?" etc.**

**Approximately 30 minutes in, a member of the audience is asked to take a hammer outside of the auditorium by one of the performers. They do not always do so, and importantly they are under no obligation to do so.**

**However, the nature of that request can generate a certain amount of debate both with the performers and among the audience; while Front Of House staff will be briefed about this in advance, if/when an audience member decides to take the hammer out, FOH staff should NOT intervene unless THEY ARE SPECIFICALLY REQUESTED TO by that member of the audience.**

# Content

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# About

**SACE Stage 1 English KU3: [Learn more](#)**

The ancient city of Palmyra was one of the best preserved in the world. Tourists flocked from around the world to look at the iconic temples of Bel and Baalshamin, as well as the Arch of Triumph. Tragically, that all changed in 2015 when ISIS gained control of the city and destroyed the temples, looted the graves and used the amphitheatre to stage executions.

In the show, the civil war in Syria is not mentioned once, but what it has in abundance is the ability to cut to what's really going on beneath the complex mire of world events. A playful dispute involving a couple of china plates slides inexorably toward a shattering climax as the audience is asked to pick sides between Voutsas' implosive underdog and Lesca's charismatic dominance. Initially the taking of sides is light hearted but slowly it becomes something else much darker; power, ego and conflict become the dominating factors. By the end audiences watch on fascinated and appalled at the allegory before them and consider the human capacity for cruelty and violence.

It was a smash hit (literally) at the 2017 Edinburgh Fringe and has been touring the world ever since. Consistently audiences are laughing one minute and discomfited the next as they witness a metaphor on power, civilisation and spectatorship the next.

Conceived by Bertrand Lesca and Nasi Voutsas, the conventions followed make it hard to label the presentation, is it a classic straightman/fallguy comedy duo, are they Absurdist everymen or astute psycho-political analysts? Palmyra is an exploration of revenge, the politics of destruction and what we consider to be barbaric, inviting people to step back from the news and look at what lies beneath, and beyond, civilization.

**"They are superb clowns, but out of the clowning wells something much darker about power, ego and conflict...by the end you watch appalled and fascinated by our capacity to inflict cruelty and violence on each other...Viciously funny"**

- *The Guardian*

**"Sublime... Palmyra's played with the lightest of touches, and, actually, the utmost of control."**

- *What'sOnStage*

# Synopsis

Two men on a stripped back stage initially engaging in a playful dispute. Gradually what starts as a domestic dispute over ownership of two plates slowly evolves into a psycho-political analysis. As dialogue and action is generated between the performers and the audience the tone of the narrative will shift and change according to the responses.

**SEE NOTE TO TEACHER IN WARNING SECTION ON INSIDE COVER**

**"The couple have a terrific knack for allowing experimental wackiness to descend into the deeply sinister."**

*- The Independent*

# Themes

**ACARA English ACADLY1749: [Learn more](#)**

**SACE Stage 2 English An1: [Learn more](#)**

- The abuse of power
- Global humanitarian responsibility
- Cultural diversity

# Characters

**NB** *The actors on stage are the devisers and writers of Palmyra and are not playing traditional scripted characters. They address each other and the audience using their own names but have developed these characters as part of the process of exploring the subject matter addressed in the performance.*

**Bertrand Lesca** plays a charismatic and charming Frenchman who uses his power to manipulate Voutsas throughout the performance. From tiny sibling-like digs and button pushing to downright manipulation, Lesca is relentless in his dominance both subtly and overtly.

**Nasi Voutsas** provides Lesca with a defiant counterpart. Despite the relentless dominance he suffers at the hands of Lesca, Voutsas continues to stay true to his beliefs. Audiences see him allow his vulnerability to be exposed time and time again even though Lesca continues to abuse him therefore allowing the audience to experience the injustice of this perversion of power.



Photo: Alex Brenner

# Production

## Style and Conventions

**SACE Stage 2 English Ap1:** [Learn more](#)

*Palmyra* is presented as a two hander in a simple performance space with minimal props, costumes, and with actors using their own names. By directly addressing the audience and breaking the 4<sup>th</sup> wall, the production reflects the work and conventions of Jerzy Grotowski and his Poor Theatre \* (see *resources*). Grotowski believed that theatre should be focused on the skill of the performers rather than relying on the excess of large-scale shows with detailed sets, costumes, props and lighting. This enables audience members to focus on the relevant issues explored in the performance rather than suspending their disbelief and engaging only as viewers peering into another world to which they have no direct connection. This also links to Brecht's techniques who Grotowski was also influenced by. Grotowski's focus on the skill of the actor also links to Stanislavski's influence which can be observed in in the vast amounts of subtext and inference employed by Voutsas and Lesca throughout *Palmyra* and their motivations and intentions that protrude further than the text as performers on stage.

The use of actors' bodies through movement to music as well as placement on stage further provides symbolism of the relationship between the characters and links nicely to Grotowski's use of movement. The interaction with the audience combines with the minimal staging to ensure the audience is active rather passive; the audience are under no illusions and therefore personally engaged with the subject matter.

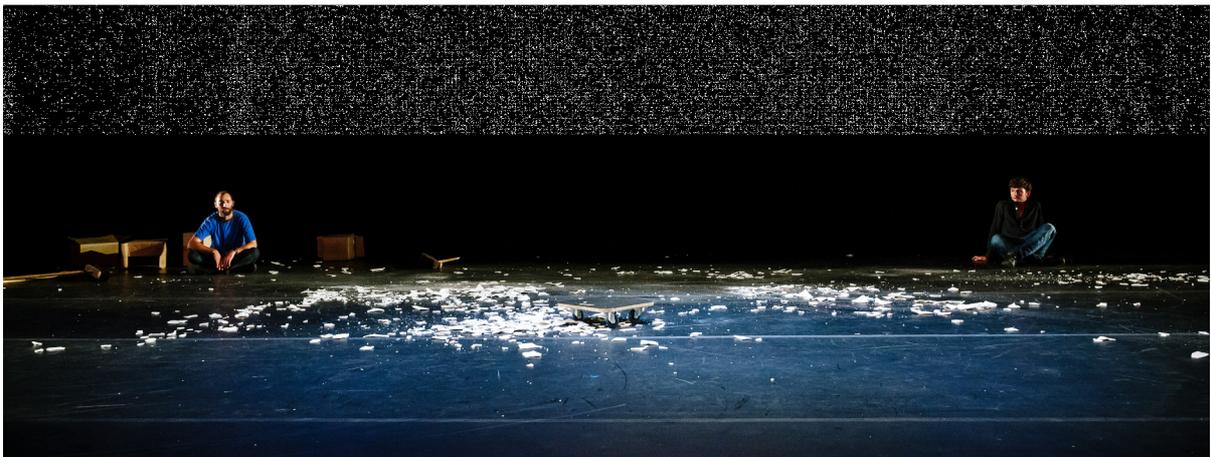


Photo: Alex Brenner

## Venue

Adelaide College of the Arts Main Theatre is a proscenium arch theatre with the audience raked steeply from the stage level upwards. The steeply raked seating in the auditorium allows audience members an intimate and uninterrupted view of the performers from every viewpoint.

## Tech Insight

**ACARA Drama ACADR052:** [Learn more](#)

Despite the minimalistic style of *Palmyra*, the detail for every show is extremely precise. Students with an interest in lighting will note the depth of detail even for a lighting plot that is 'seemingly' hardly noticeable to the audience. This production demonstrates the crucial role lighting has in the overall narrative of a production.

[See lighting plan here](#)



Photo: Alex Brenner

# Curriculum

## Prompts and Activities to Explore with Students

### Before The Show

**IB Diploma Global Politics Objective 2:**  
**SACE Stage 1 Drama KU3: [Learn more](#)**

#### Preparing to Make Connections

Reference to the ancient city of Palmyra is not mentioned once in the performance. Students could work in groups to research this city, its infamy, importance and status in order to discuss its relationship to the performance after viewing.

Possible questions after this research and viewing the performance could include: What does the city of Palmyra have to do with the performance? What parallels can be drawn with the treatment of Palmyra and the treatment of other important cultures in our world; in particular the colonisation of Australia and our contemporary relationship with Australian first nations peoples.

#### Research Task

**IB Diploma Literature & Performance Objective 2: [Learn more](#)**

Who was Jerzy Grotowski and what are the conventions of his Poor Theatre? What other innovators influenced Grotowski? Draw up a list of conventions used by Grotowski including examples; these could be visual examples, video examples or just annotated lists. These ideas should be revisited after seeing *Palmyra* to identify which techniques were employed for the performance.

#### Prompt Question and Activity

**IB MYP Individuals and Society Criterion D: [Learn more](#)**

When thinking about Europe, what countries do students see as more or less powerful? Why? What are the hints, clues and ideas they have that lead them to their conclusions. Provide students with a list of European countries or flags. Have them work as a group to line them up from most to least powerful. *What is it that defines power?* They must negotiate their final choice as a group and back up their reasons why they settled on their final order. Some research may be undertaken in order to provide reason.

## After The Show

### **Subtext: Explore what is really being said**

Sometimes the words that Bertrand and Nasi use do not sound oppressive but the atmosphere and action created remains through the subtext.

Task: Students to discuss how this sense of oppression was conveyed. As a group establish a list of words that could imply negative meaning in a variety of context.

Discuss the use of plates being smashed as a metaphor for conflict – personal and global

### **Activity: Explore the technique of Open Scenes**

Open scenes are ambiguous scenes for two people with little content and are usually written for pairs of actors. They are generally only 8-10 lines long so that the lines can easily be memorized. And, as their name suggests, they contain dialogue that is open to many interpretations; the lines are intentionally ambiguous, suggesting no particular plot or intentions.

### **IB MYP Arts Criterion D: [Learn more](#)**

Here is an example of an Open scene:

A: Can you believe that?  
B: No.  
A: What are we going to do?  
B: We?  
A: This is really big.  
B: We can manage it.  
A: Got any ideas?  
B: Yes. But don't tell anyone.

### **A Process for working with Open Scenes**

Adapted from: <https://www.thoughtco.com/open-scenes-for-acting-practice-3938469>

- Pair off students and ask them to decide who will be A and who will be B.
- Distribute a copy of the Open scene. (Note: You may give the same Open scene to every pair of actors or you may use several different scenes.)
- Ask the pairs of students to read through the scene together using no expression. Just read the lines.
- Ask them to read through the scene a second time and experiment with line readings—possible expression, volume, pitch, speed, with the intention of one

character being more powerful than the other (this could be either A or B depending on the decisions made by the students) etc.

- Ask them to read through the scene a third time and change their line readings.
- Give them time to make some decisions about who they are, where they are, and what is happening in their scene.
- Ensure students experiment in creative ways with volume, pitch, speed, levels, pauses to explore different ways of exploiting power; the more they steer away from the obvious first attempt the more interesting discoveries will be made!
- Give them a short amount of time to memorize their lines and rehearse their scene. (Note: Insist on precise memorization of lines—no substituted words, no added words or sounds. Actors must practice remaining true to the playwright's script—even in Open scenes.)
- Have each pair present the first draft of their scene.

### **Towards, Away, Stay.**

Adapted from: <https://www.stagemilk.com/directing-exercises/>

This is a great exercise to use when first looking at a scene and gives initial insights into which character holds the power at different points. This exercise is not to be directed, just to be observed. Provide pairs of students with a simple two hander scene (the above open scene could be used and developed) or use scenes you have already looked at in class.

1. Start with the actors standing a short distance apart.
2. They can only move along a straight line, and must always be facing their scene partner. They can only move on their line.
3. With each line, they can make a choice: move towards the other actor, away from the other actor, or stay where they are.

The limited movement causes the actors to make clear choices with each line, and discover when they are on the attack, and when they are on the retreat. Which end of the room the actors end up on is a clear indication of which character has the most power in the scene.

You can also add SIT to this exercise, where an actor can tell the other actor to sit before one of their lines. This naturally happens when a character is trying to gain power or has important information to say. Again this exercise is to be observed not directed, and note any interesting interactions.

### **The Great Game of Power**

### **IB Diploma Theatre Objective 3: [Learn more](http://dbp.theatredance.utexas.edu/content/great-game-power)**

Adapted from: <http://dbp.theatredance.utexas.edu/content/great-game-power>

*Use this exercise to discuss types or systems of government, character relationships, or representations of power within story or history.*

The Great Game of Power is an activity that explores representations of power through the construction of a visual image made of everyday objects. This strategy explores the relationship between observation and interpretation through the use of the DAR (Describe, Analyze, Relate) meaning-making routine.

#### **Directions**

Place a set of four chairs (all the same) in a row, along with a water bottle in front of a seated group. Ask for a volunteer to silently arrange the 4 chairs and a water bottle in such a way that, in their opinion, one chair has more power than all the other chairs. Explain that any of the objects can be moved in any direction or placed on top of each other, but none of the objects can be removed altogether from the space. Sit in the audience and wait for a volunteer to arrange the chairs. Once the chairs have been arranged ask that volunteer to return to their seat and to not reveal his/her thinking behind the arrangement. Next, ask the group to interpret or "read" the image made by the chairs and water bottle:

#### **Describe**

What do you see? Describe the way the chairs are positioned.

#### **Analyse**

What does that position represent or make you think of? Why do you say that? What is another interpretation of this position? Which chair has the most power? Why?

Relate: (Make connections to content) If this image represents a moment in history/a scene from our book/an interaction at our school ... what does this image represent? Why? What else could it be? Encourage a number of different interpretations. Have another volunteer repeat the activity.

#### **Reflection**

What are some of the different ways we saw power represented in this activity?

What makes someone or something powerful?

Who or what is powerful in our world now/was powerful then? Why?

#### **Possible Side-Coaching**

Remember you can arrange the chairs in any position you wish.

How is the water bottle positioned in the image? Consider what it represents.

### **Possible Variations/Applications**

As a final step in the activity, invite a student to place and pose a body/their body in the image in an effort to take power away from the chair. This leads to reading a body as image in relationship to an object. Invite students to make a specific image of power in response to a prompt: Arrange the chairs to represent the author's argument from the reading. Or Arrange the chairs to represent a democracy. In this version, the person or group creating the image should get to share their thinking after all the rest of the group has completed their meaning-making, since they were working to create a specific interpretation.

### **Revisit the themes**

- Power and the abuse of power
- Global humanitarian responsibility
- Cultural diversity

Students to discuss if having explored them prior to the production did this add/distract from the intent of the performers and the production.

### **Student Review**

For the student's review, points for them to consider in addition to normal review practice:

- What impact did the absence of spoken dialogue make to the sense of drama
- Did the physicality of the performance increase your understanding of the idea the performers were pursuing
- This was a pursuit of 'macho' expression, presented by two males, how would it work if two females

*It can be assumed that the on-stage versions of the two performers may have been developed from parts of their real-life characteristics but we cannot assume their on-stage personas are reflections of their own beliefs, values or characteristics.*

- What impression did you have of the 'truth' of the dialogue and whether personal or abstract?
- Having researched the conflict in Syria how significant did the plate smashing relate as a metaphor?
- Was it a distraction that the performers used their own names?

For review writing format: See Review Writing Guide document

# Meet the Company

## Performers

**Bertrand Lesca** is a theatre maker from France. After studying at Warwick University and RADA, he went on to assist Peter Brook and Declan Donnellan on several international tours. He is a founding member of FellSwoop Theatre for whom he directs and devises. FellSwoop explore the relationship between music and devised performance, collaborating with composers and artists from around the world to develop new work. Theatre credits with FellSwoop include: *Ghost Opera* (Lowry, Tobacco Factory Theatres), *To Know How You Stand* (Warwick Arts Centre), *Ablutions* based on the novel by Patrick DeWitt (Bristol Old Vic) and *Current Location* by Toshiki Okada (Madrid Fringe).

**Nasi Voutsas** graduated from East 15 Acting School where he studied on the Acting and Contemporary theatre course. He is co-founder of ANTLER, for whom he writes, performs and plays music. Theatre credits: *If I Were Me* (ANTLER, Soho Theatre/The Bush); *Dusk* (Fevered Sleep, Young Vic and touring); *Where the White Stops* (ANTLER, The Bush); *This Way Up* (ANTLER); *Maria, 1968* (ANTLER); *The Altitude Brothers* (Snuff Box); *The Idiots* (National Theatre Studio).

## Creative Team

**Dramaturgy** / Louise Stephens

**Lighting design** / Jo Palmer

**Touring technicians** / Ruth Green, Jessica Hung Han Yun



Photo: Alex Brenner

# **Additional Resources**

Additional Content from Bert and Nasi

<https://bertandnasi.com/online-content-20/>

Poor Theatre Conventions

<https://thedramateacher.com/poor-theatre-conventions/>