

# EDUCATION PACK



STATE OPERA  
SOUTH AUSTRALIA

# FIRST THINGS FIRST

## What is Opera?

Opera is a type of theatre which combines drama, music, elements of dance or movement with exciting costumes and innovative set design.

However, in opera, the actors are trained singers who sing their lines instead of speaking them.

A librettist writes the libretto - the words that are to be sung, like a script. Often, the plot of the opera is taken from stories in books or plays, or real world events. A composer writes the music for the singers and orchestra.

An orchestra accompanies the singers. A conductor coordinates both the singers on stage and the musicians.

An easy way to think of opera is that it is a story told with music. In a lot of operas, the people on stage sing all the way through. Imagine having all your conversations by singing them!



## Opera Singers

It takes a lot of training to become an opera singer. A lot of aspiring opera singers will take this route: Sing in choirs, volunteer for solos, take singing lessons, study singing and music at university, then audition for the chorus or roles in operas.

Opera singers hardly ever use a microphone, which means that they train their voices to be heard by audiences, even over the top of orchestras.



---

# THE CREATORS

## THE COMPOSER

### Richard Meale

Born in Sydney in 1932, Richard Meale studied piano, clarinet, harp, history and theory at the NSW State Conservatorium of Music, but in composition remained self-taught. In 1960 he was awarded a Ford Foundation Grant which he used to undertake studies in non-Western music at the University of California in Los Angeles, where he concentrated on Japanese court music and Javanese and Balinese gamelan.

After returning to Australia, Meale joined the Music Department of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, where for seven years he made an important contribution to national radio with special programs of Asian and contemporary music. As a pianist, lecturer and broadcaster, conductor and composer, Richard Meale played a crucial part in the propagation of avant-garde music in Australia.

He has given the first local performances of works by Boulez, Bussotti, Castiglioni and Messiaen, as well as conducting the Australian premiere of Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* with Marilyn Richardson. During this time, his own music was generating considerable interest within Australia and in 1965 Dean Dixon performed *Homage to Garcia Lorca* in Europe. Richard Meale died in 2009, aged 77.

## THE LIBRETTIST

### David Malouf

David George Joseph Malouf (born 20 March 1934) is an Australian writer, widely recognized as one of Australia's greatest. He was awarded the Neustadt International Prize for Literature in 2000, his 1993 novel *Remembering Babylon* won the International Dublin Literary Award in 1996, he won the inaugural Australia-Asia Literary Award in 2008, and he was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. In 2016, he received the Australia Council Award for Lifetime Achievement in Literature.

Malouf has written several volumes of poetry, three collections of short stories, and a play, *Blood Relations* (1988). He has written libretti for three operas (including *Voss* of course), and *Baa Baa Black Sheep* (with music by Michael Berkeley), which combines a semi-autobiographical story by Rudyard Kipling with Kipling's own *Jungle Books*.

His memoirs, *12 Edmondstone Street*, were published in 1985.

# THE CHARACTERS

**JOHANN VOSS** The main protagonist of the opera. A German explorer on a mission to find the rumoured inland sea who falls in love with Laura Trevelyan and forms a bond with her more psychological than romantic. As Voss and his party explore the dessert, he and Laura maintain a mystical link by means of telepathy.

**LAURA** After being serenaded with a German song, Laura falls for Voss, forming a connection with him 'in spirit'. She does not agree with his decision to explore the Australian desert and instead provides support through their telekinetic bond.

Judd – An ex-convict, escapee and survivor who joins Voss' expedition as the chief guide

**MR BONNER** Laura's uncle and the sponsor for Voss' expedition

**HARRY** An Englishman who Voss met aboard a ship. Voss finds him to be "an easy shadow to wear, simple if superfluous"

**LE MESURIER** An explorer with whom Voss has explored with before. Voss tells Mr Bonner that he "has great qualities if he does not cut his throat", an ominous prefigure of things to come...

**PALFREYMAN** An ornithologist and a Christian who accompanies Voss on his expedition

Other supporting characters:

Belle	Reporter
Tom	Rose
Mrs. Bonner	Mercy
Mrs. Judd	Topp



---

# SYNOPSIS

Sydney, 1845, barely 50 years after the creation of the colony of New South Wales.

**ACT I** introduces the German explorer, Johann Ulrich Voss, who desires to be the first man to cross the continent in search of the great inland sea. To help finance his dream, Voss has sought the assistance of Mr Bonner, a wealthy merchant, who is hosting an evening party to welcome the volunteers on his expedition. In the garden, Voss meets Bonner's niece, Laura Trevelyan whom he serenades with a German song. With a spirit as uncompromising as Voss's own, Laura will not offer prayers for the expedition's success; instead, she will follow Voss "in spirit". Voss draws together his party – the young Harry Robarts, the society gentleman Frank Le Mesurier and the naturalist Palfreyman. Despite misgivings from some of the women, the colonists farewell Voss's party to the rousing strains of a march.

**ACT II** is set in an open space that is sometimes the desert, sometimes Sydney, sometimes both simultaneously. Voss arrives in incongruous frockcoat, singing another of his German songs, and comes upon Mrs Judd, doing her laundry. Voss is happy to sign on her husband Judd – "ex-convict, escapee, survivor" – as chief guide, assisted by two trackers, Dugald and Jacky (non-speaking parts). Voss gives his new guides a knife as a gift. The scene divides at NIGHTWATCH. On one side of the stage, Laura and Rose Portion, a pregnant servant in the Bonner household, are sewing. Rose contends that she cannot understand Voss, whereas Laura maintains she can understand him "in my heart". On the other side of the stage, Palfreyman is painting a rare lily. Rose and Laura sleep, as do Palfreyman and Voss who suddenly bursts into life, refusing to "accept the terms". Voss and Laura have another of their imaginary conversations, and Voss sends her a letter. Dugald takes Voss's actual letters and slowly tears them up, scattering them to the desert winds. Another divided stage signifies the arrival of CHRISTMAS DAY. Voss's party prepare to eat the carcass of one of their dead horses. Voss refuses to eat it. In Sydney, Laura laments the death of Rose who has left a baby daughter named Mercy. In the desert, Harry Robarts and Judd observe the increasingly erratic behaviour of Voss who, they conclude, is sleepwalking. Ever more delirious, Voss refuses to acknowledge that Judd should now take command of the expedition. Le Mesurier, half-naked and mad, dances a wild dance. Judd appeals to Harry to escape with him, but the young man will hear none of it. One by one, the members of the party die terrible deaths, Voss dies the most gruesome death of all. Only Judd survives.

An Orchestral Interlude ushers in the **EPILOGUE**, set in a house garden in Sydney some twenty years later. Society folk are dancing and children are playing 'Blind Man's Bluff'. Laura, now a schoolmistress in widow's weeds, a tall, dark "scarecrow", is here to inaugurate a statue in memory of Voss. A reporter introduces Laura to Judd, again the survivor, who relates the death of Voss. Laura addresses the gathering and, by extension, the audience. Voss's legend will be written, she affirms, "in the air, in the sand, in thorns, in stones, by those who are troubled by it." Her final words ring out as the curtain falls: "And what we do not know, the air will tell us, the air will tell us."

## VOSS: THE GREAT AUSTRALIAN OPERA

The origins of Voss can be found not in the Australian Outback but in the desert of North Africa. In 1941 Flight Lieutenant Patrick Martindale Victor White, on leave from his post as an Intelligence Officer in Egypt, met a cultivated Greek-Egyptian at a gentlemen's party in Alexandria. The relationship of the two 29-year-old men was largely propelled by ESP, in which White was a firm believer. After several years living together in Cairo and Greece, Patrick White moved his new partner Manoly Lascaris to the outskirts of Sydney. They were together for nearly 50 years and became the best-known gay couple in Australia until White's death in Sydney on 30th September 1990.

White had been searching for ideas 'for a novel about a megalomaniac explorer'. During the Blitz on London, he read the journals of Edward John Eyre and other explorers. Later, at the Mitchell Library in Sydney, he read the journals of Ludwig Leichhardt. The Prussian botanist (1813-1848) had led three expeditions into the Outback. On the third of these, Leichhardt and his party vanished. Great stuff for a novel, surely, but White didn't want to write a historical novel – that would be 'too difficult and boring', besides he was 'far too unscholarly for that'. In the end, he concocted the character of Johann Ulrich Voss from a brew comprising Leichhardt and other explorers, the 'arch-megalomaniac of the day' Adolf Hitler, while admitting that Voss – his 'most unpleasant character'—contained 'more of my own character than anybody else's'.

Voss was first published by Eyre and Spottiswoode, London, in 1957. White had invited Sidney Nolan, then living in London, to create the dust jacket for his new novel, the fifth of the twelve novels to be published in his lifetime. Thus began a long and creative friendship, ending, like so many other White associations, in bitter acrimony. In 1957, Voss won the first Miles Franklin Award for best Australian novel and continued to garner plaudits and notice for White, even after the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1973, 'for an epic and psychological narrative art which has introduced a new continent into literature', the Nobel citation read. Coincidentally but surely momentously, the Nobel was announced in the same week as the opening of the Sydney Opera House.

The Garden Scene: Marilyn Richardson (Laura) and Geoffrey Chard (Voss) in the original production



---

## VOSS: THE GREAT AUSTRALIAN OPERA

It seemed that Voss would be forever associated with opera, albeit obliquely. In 1977, the British impresario Peter Hemmings became General Manager of The Australian Opera. Excited by the novel, Hemmings approached Richard Meale to create an opera. Initially, Meale resisted: Voss, he reasoned, already contained 'so much music [that] it couldn't be done'. In the meantime, Hemmings had approached the writer and opera buff David Malouf to create a libretto. Despite his own intense interest in opera, White, then 68 and in poor health, felt he was too old and ill equipped to create the libretto himself. Moreover, he had been badly burned by the failure of three attempts to create a film version of his novel. Eventually, at the urging of the young director Jim Sharman, White relented and allowed Malouf to proceed.

From his writing retreat in Tuscany, Malouf worked quickly to transform White's sprawling novel into a workable libretto. When Malouf's pages arrived, Meale changed his mind: an opera based on Voss could indeed be done. But the composer was notoriously slow. Sharman's attempt to schedule it at his 1982 Adelaide Festival had to be re-considered, with 'The Garden Scene' offered as a 12-minute teaser-preview.

In the next few years, enormous pressure was put on Meale to produce the opera which became the centrepiece of the 1986 Adelaide Festival, the fifth to be directed by Anthony Steel. Jim Sharman directed, and Stuart Challender conducted the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra in the pit of the Adelaide Festival Theatre. The cast was led by baritone Geoffrey Chard, returning from a brilliant career in London to re-settle, and soprano Marilyn Richardson, long-time associate of the composer, and preeminent Australian exponent of contemporary music. In their opera, Meale and Malouf had created a collage of styles. The lyricism of bel canto placed alongside colonial keyboard Quadrilles, echoes of German lied alongside angular passages derived from contemporary European music, sometimes juxtaposed or superimposed. Wisely, they chose not to imitate the sound of the Australian Aborigines, whose culture provides the backbone of the mythology and dramaturgy of White's novel.

The reception to the Adelaide premiere was extremely positive. In the Sydney Morning Herald, Roger Covell wrote, "Beyond all doubt, Voss is an opera of lyrical idealism, intensely personal in its dramatic method, moving in its human relationships, transfiguring reality with music and words of mistakably nobility". In the opinion of many, 'the great Australian opera' – so long sought after but ever-elusive – had arrived. Now, thirty years after its disappearance from the opera stage, Voss has returned, and this one night only in Adelaide (live streamed to the world thanks to Victorian Opera) will enable us to see if that characterisation has endured over the decades.

---

## ADAPTING LITERATURE TO STAGE AND SCREEN

It is not uncommon for operatic works to derive their source material from literary works. In some cases, the source material is followed closely by the librettist, and other times they take more creative freedom. Some elements that are completely acceptable in literary form can be hard to translate onto the stage, such as jumps between a variety of locations making multiple scene changes necessary or characters having minor but significant roles to the story that are not cost effective to include in the stage production.

Some popular examples of literary works that have been adapted for the stage include:

- **Voss** - adapted from Patrick White's novel
- **The Turn of the Screw** - adapted from Henry James' novella
- **Carmen** - adapted from Prosper Mérimée's novella
- **Madama Butterfly** - adapted from John Luther Long's novella
- **The Handmaid's Tale** - adapted from Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel
- **The Perfect American** - adapted from Peter Stephan Jungk's *The King of America*

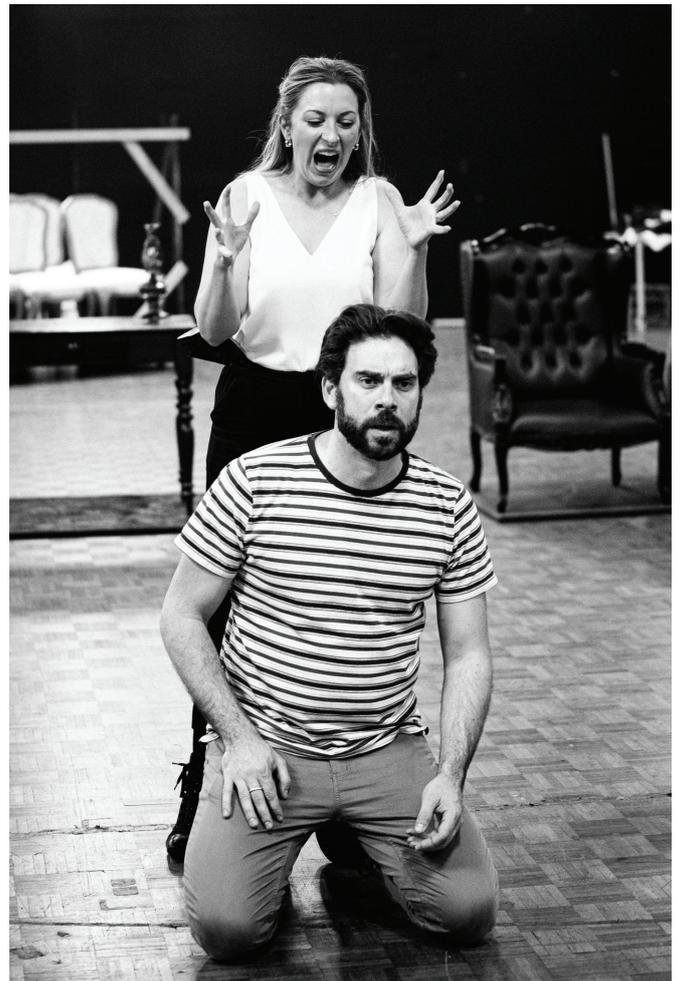
---

## COMPLEX THEMES

Just like literature, stage shows and movies, storytelling means finding a way through art to talk about complex topics: life, love, drama, death.

Sometimes, the way these topics are represented on stage can be uncomfortable, controversial or confronting, especially for a young audience: for example, it can include depictions of violence against women, or hint to racism.

Mature content is always best discussed in class both before and after the performance as it helps students understand the context and unpack their feelings.



# ATTENDING AN OPERA

## Before the performance:

It is a good idea to do at least a little research about the opera that you are to attend. Taking 10 minutes to review the plot or listening to excerpts from the piece, for example on Youtube, will make sure you are familiar with what you are about to see and help you to better enjoy all that is happening on-stage.

Find out where the theatre is, where you collect your tickets from, and aim to be there at least twenty minutes before the opera starts.

## What do I do during the performance?

Enjoy the show and take it all in.

Respond as you would in a movie theatre. The story might make you laugh, it may make you cry.

Please turn off all phones.

Be aware that any filming, recording and photography is strictly prohibited.

Be considerate of all other opera-goers, so keeping quiet and not tapping or humming along is

## How do I understand what is going on?

Voss was written, and is performed, in English, so it's easy to understand what's happening on stage.

However it is always advisable to familiarize yourself with the production before the performance, for example by reading the synopsis and understanding who the characters are.

There will be surtitle screens hung above the stage in the theatre which provide a script so you won't miss any of the action while reading.

## After the performance:

- Discuss it with friends, teachers and parents!
- Attend a live opera when you can
- Find a Metropolitan Opera Live screening at a movie theatre
- Watch an opera on YouTube, either a whole one or just the highlights
- Read books about composers, conductors, opera singers or other topics we have mentioned.
- Ask your parents or teachers for advice on where they think you could find more information



---

## OPERA GLOSSARY

The below terms may be helpful in understanding opera better:

<b>ACT</b>	a major section (like a chapter of a novel) of a dramatic production. Each act may consist of a number of scenes. An opera has one or more acts.
<b>ACCOMPANIMENT</b>	the music that supports or plays a secondary role to the melody. The accompaniment can be sung or played.
<b>ARIA</b>	a solo song.
<b>COMPOSER</b>	the musician who writes the music of the operatic piece.
<b>CHORD</b>	more than one note sounded at the same time (simultaneously).
<b>ENSEMBLE</b>	a group of musicians. In opera an ensemble can refer to any music written for two or more voices.
<b>HARMONY</b>	any combination of notes that are sung or played simultaneously. Usually the word harmony refers to a pleasing combination of those sounds (but not always).
<b>KEY</b>	the presence of tonality.
<b>LIBRETTO</b>	the text of the opera.
<b>LYRICIST/LIBRETTIST</b>	a writer who transforms prose into something suitable for a song setting. This writer has the skills of a poet to structure the text into verses.
<b>MAJOR/MINOR</b>	the modality in harmony. These can be demonstrated by simple triads or coloured by extra notes.
<b>OPERA</b>	a work for the stage that combines music with dramatic and theatrical elements. An opera can be of any length, combined with instrumental forces of any size, and can be based on stories of any type. An opera in the 16th century can be very different from those created in the 20th century.
<b>TEXTURE</b>	the layers of sound. Different combination of pitches and of instruments can create interesting sound that can be described as heavy or light, thick or thin.
<b>THEME</b>	a melody belonging to a passage of music or assigned to a dramatic character.
<b>TIMBRE</b>	the character or quality of a musical sound or voice.

---

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- An introduction to opera's voice types (The Royal Opera) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hLfvkwTnJVM>
- Information and sound clips: Opera 101 <http://www.theopera101.com/operaabc/voices/>
- Stuart Maunder, Artistic Director of State Opera South Australia, talks about Voss <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gGOGUHSua7Q>

---

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This resource was collated by State Opera of South Australia.

### Photo Credits:

State Opera South Australia's production of VOSS,  
photos by Soda Street Productions and Frankie the Creative

---

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Operas based on books

<https://www.eno.org/discover-opera/operas-based-on-books/>

From page to stage: tricks of the trade in adapting theater from books

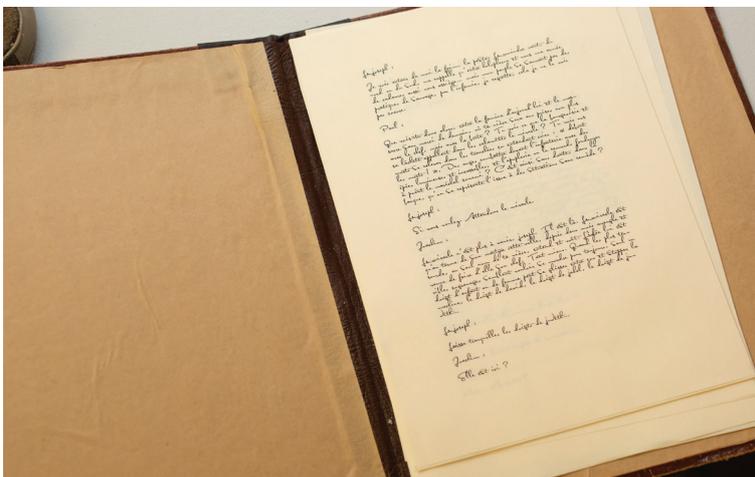
[https://www.oregonlive.com/performance/2012/04/from\\_page\\_to\\_stage\\_tricks\\_of\\_t.html](https://www.oregonlive.com/performance/2012/04/from_page_to_stage_tricks_of_t.html)

The Story of Voss, by Vincent Plush

<https://www.victorianopera.com.au/behind-the-scenes/the-story-of-voss>

Voss

<https://www.rob-tomlinson.com/a-good-read/voss>



To enquire about education opportunities with  
State Opera of South Australia:  
ph. (08) 7077 2816  
[education@stateopera.com.au](mailto:education@stateopera.com.au)