

Module A

Experience through Language

Elective 2 –
Distinctively Visual

'The Shoehorn
Sonata'
By John Misto

Drama



Module A

Experience through Language

- explore the uses of a particular aspect of language.
- understand how our perceptions of and relationships with others and the world are shaped in written, spoken and visual language.
- study of a prescribed text through a key aspect of language.
- examine language structures and features used in the prescribed text and in a range of situations that students encounter in their daily lives.
- Students need to explore, examine and analyse how the conventions of textual forms, language modes and media shape meaning.

(Stage 6 English Syllabus p33)

Elective Guidelines:

In their responding and composing students:

- explore the ways the **images we see and/or visualise** in texts are created.
- consider *how* the forms and language of different texts *create* these images, *affect* interpretation and *shape* meaning.
- examine one prescribed text in addition to other texts providing *examples of the distinctively visual*.



There is a
biological basis
for visual
communication

**Sight is a
powerful
sense!**



Consider:
What can
make
something
visually
distinctive?



Viewpoint, perspective, connotation and denotation can impact on our interpretation of what is seen or visualised in our mind's eye.

Distinctively Visual Texts

- Incorporate visual imagery to express ideas and convey meaning to others.
- Use a responder's ability to respond to imagery; ranging from simple identification to complex interpretation of contextual, metaphoric and philosophical meaning.
- Visual images are never innocent or neutral reflections of reality...they represent and offer not a mirror of the world but an interpretation of it." **A. Midalia**
- Are characterised by using the language of the image as a stimulus for critical reflection and personal interpretation.
Umberto Eco
- Nowadays people's visual imagination is so much more sophisticated, so much more developed, particularly in young people, that now you can make an image which just slightly suggests something, they can make of it what they will. **Robert Doisneau**

“Composers of distinctively visual texts use techniques that allow the audience to ‘see’ with their eyes as well as with their minds.”

Texts can include film, drama, poetry, prose fiction or media.

Examine the following images and comment on what makes them:

- unusual, unique or unexpected
- ambiguous or confusing
- evocative or dramatic

How can distinctive visual imagery shape meaning and interpretation?

Drama as a Visual Medium

- Drama is performed in such a manner as to create an illusion of reality, the feeling that what you see happening on stage is REALLY happening.
- Plays are constructed so as to immediately get and hold the audience's attention.
- Plays should have an emotional *and* intellectual impact on the audience. If the play works, you
- should FEEL something, and you should
- go home from the theatre THINKING
- about what you have just experienced.

Stories are how we understand the world.
Drama tells stories to define our world in causal, temporal terms that an audience can understand.



Drama Basics

- Drama is a form of **visual storytelling** which relies on strong characterisation, dialogue and conflict that builds tension and audience engagement.
- Conflict and characterisation work together to create context so that an audience seeing and hearing a story instead of reading it, will understand what's going on.
- *Viewing*, not reading – is **a completely different mode of understanding and interpretation to that found in narrative prose.**
- Live Theatre also communicates its content within a precise time span. The dramatic structure must enable the audience to process the information and make meaningful connections.

John Misto's Purpose was to...

- Convey the experiences and suffering of female POWs.
- Educate Australians about their history.
- Offer Tribute/Memorial to the women whose pain and suffering at the hands of their Japanese captors after the fall of Singapore had largely been forgotten.
- Evoke emotions in the audience: shock, anger, empathy

'It is precisely the playwright's intention to startle his audience with unquestionable facts.' – Vera Hams.



JOHN MISTO:

“ ... this play is about heroism ... ”

“this is an emotional play about the relationship between two women, in which the power structures change and in which they re-visit their pasts and reconnect, and we looked at that, we looked at the humanity of it.”



The Shoehorn Sonata by John Misto

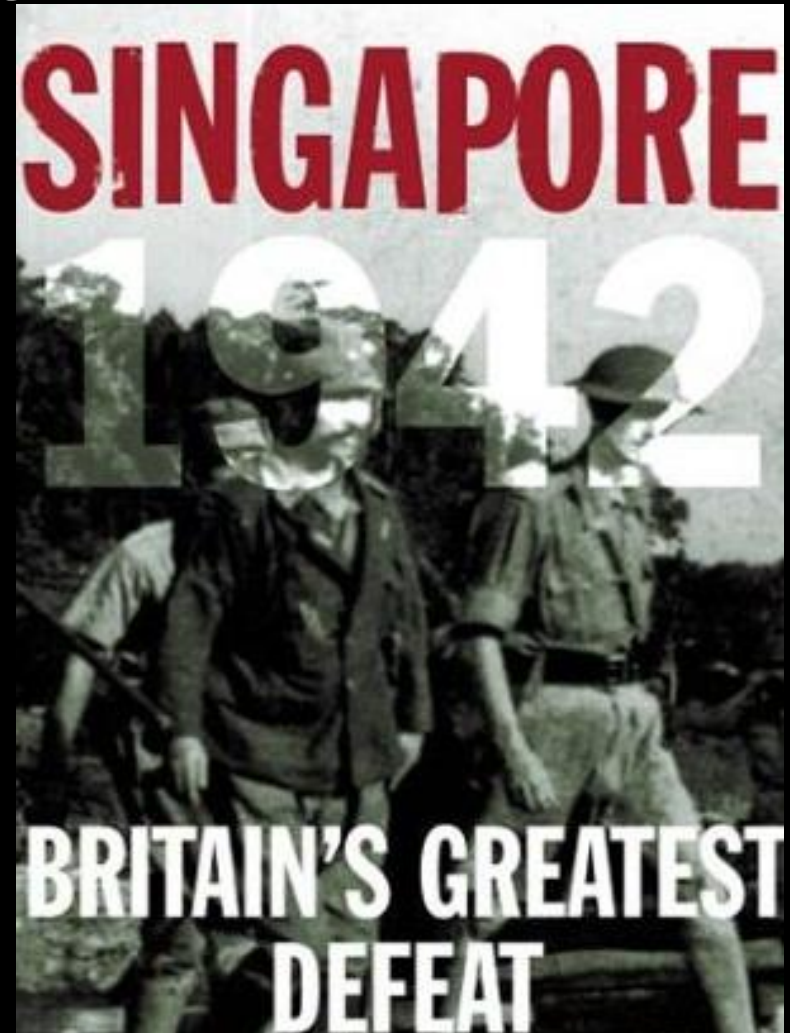
- **Context**-social, cultural, historical
- **Themes**-war, friendship and resilience
- **Characterisation**-Sheila and
- **Representation methods** – emphasis on visual methods and techniques for dramatic emphasis

Historical Context - Japanese Invasion of Singapore

After landing in Thailand and Malaya on December 8, 1941, the Japanese moved swiftly southwards and on January the causeway linking Singapore island with the mainland was blown by British engineers. They met a disorganized British defence

Churchill had ordered that the battle should be fought 'to the bitter end', but the loss of much of the city's water supply persuaded Lieutenant General Arthur Percival to surrender.

Churchill called the surrender, of some 85,000 men, 'the worst disaster... in British military history.'

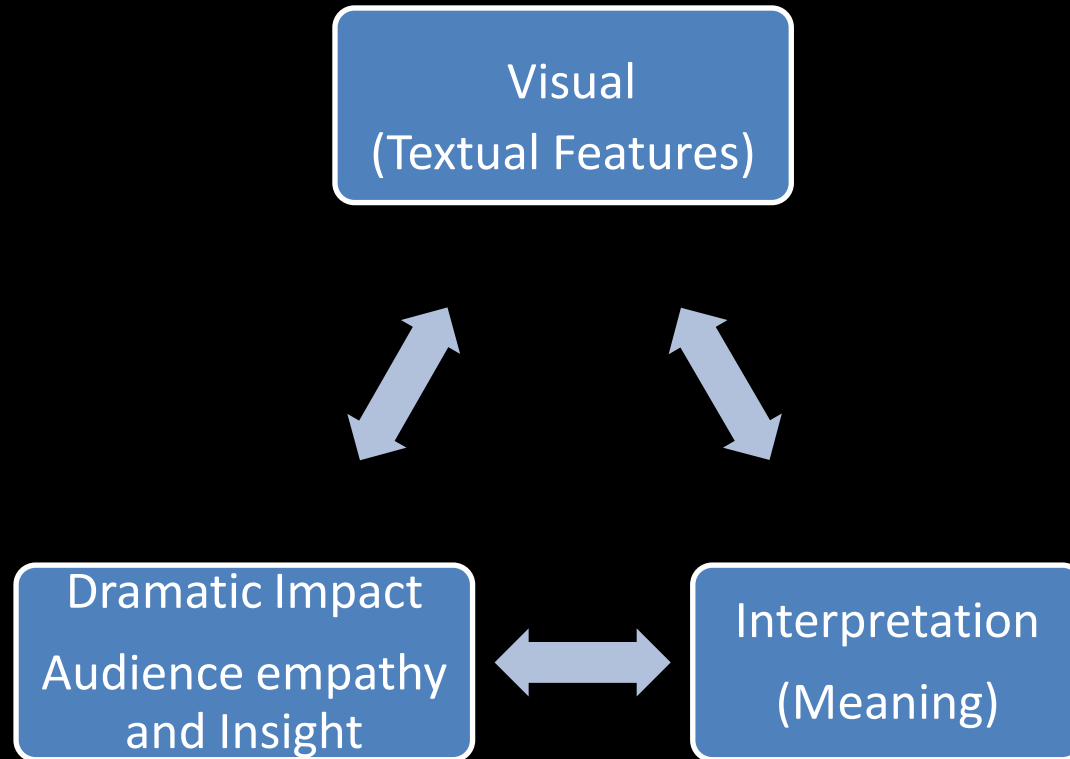


British unpreparedness and misconceptions



Misto uses slides and script to inform his audience about pre-invasion Singapore. We are given a sense of the social climate and prevailing attitudes and atmosphere. An Historical snapshot sets the scene for the

Distinctively Visual Experience



Varied techniques engage the audience and draw them into the world of the play. The interplay of slide images, evocative symbols, and sensory detail lend authenticity to time, place and experience. Misto's script effectively combines tragedy and humour, strength and weakness, imprisonment and release.

Setting

- Minimalist
- Focus on TWO characters
- Focus on what is said and seen



Audience interpretation
and response largely
shaped by visual stimuli



Body Language

Body language visually demonstrates the emotional status of the protagonists, such as fear or mutual reliance.

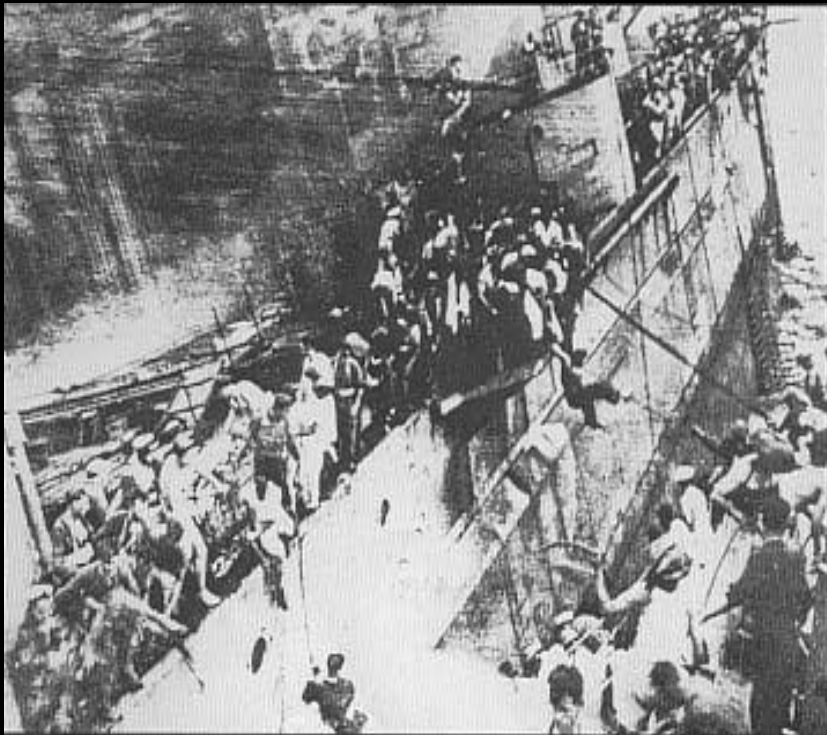
Textual Reference:

In Act 1, Scene 3 when the Japanese flag is displayed on the screen, the stage directions ask for the women to use their body language to show their anxiety. *Sheila instinctively reaches out to take Bridie's hand. They hold hands. And once again they both look vulnerable. We hear Japanese voices on the soundtrack.*



Photographic images

- Images juxtapose past and present, transporting the audience to events so that they can better understand what such survivors experienced
- Their vivid recall and public and private act of remembrance helps them deal with the trauma of war.
- By looking back, they can now look forward.



Photographic images



- Misto's use of photographic images achieve several things:
- Create historical context
 - Support the actors' dialogue.
 - Validate the memories of these women and bring them to life for the audience.
 - Offer a second visual set and remind the audience that the play deals with real events, women and experiences

Combination of Images, Music and Sound and dialogue.

- Elements of music and sound alongside images, appeal to the audience's senses.
- In Act 1, Scene 3, when the women find themselves in the water, 'Jerusalem' is sung by a young Sheila. This hymn sets a sombre mood and together with slides of Singapore on fire, help the audience to visualise their life-threatening situation.
- Their plight is reinforced by sounds of waves being played. We can see and hear their situation.

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Visually reinforces the harshness of events or highlights the tension that exists between characters or between the women and the Japanese enemy.

Sheila's description of the boat attack, vividly recalls the event. The English crew yell 'Get up! Stand up! Let the Japanese see you're just women and children.' Misto's directions add visual impact: (*Sheila stands, fixed by a very, very bright spotlight.*)

Lighting helps the audience visualise the scene. 'Some mothers clutched their children and cried. And we stared into the light'.

We can empathise with their terror and appreciate that Sheila experienced this first hand; was an eye-witness to history.



Lighting

- Used to visually represent the tension that exists between these two women. Often they are shown in separate spotlights to evoke the rift that has existed for the past 50 years.
- In the last scene, lighting is used to represent forgiveness and renewed friendship. A spotlight shines on them as they dance together before fading, a beam left on the shoe horn, a symbolic visual device representative of their loyalty and friendship.



Motifs and Symbols

A range of visual motifs and symbols are used to reinforce our perception of characters and situations. They engage the audience's continued attention and help clarify and strengthen help Misto's central themes. These include not only the shoehorn of the play's title but also the caramel tin and the chopbone – sensory signifiers of resilience, friendship and emotional survival.

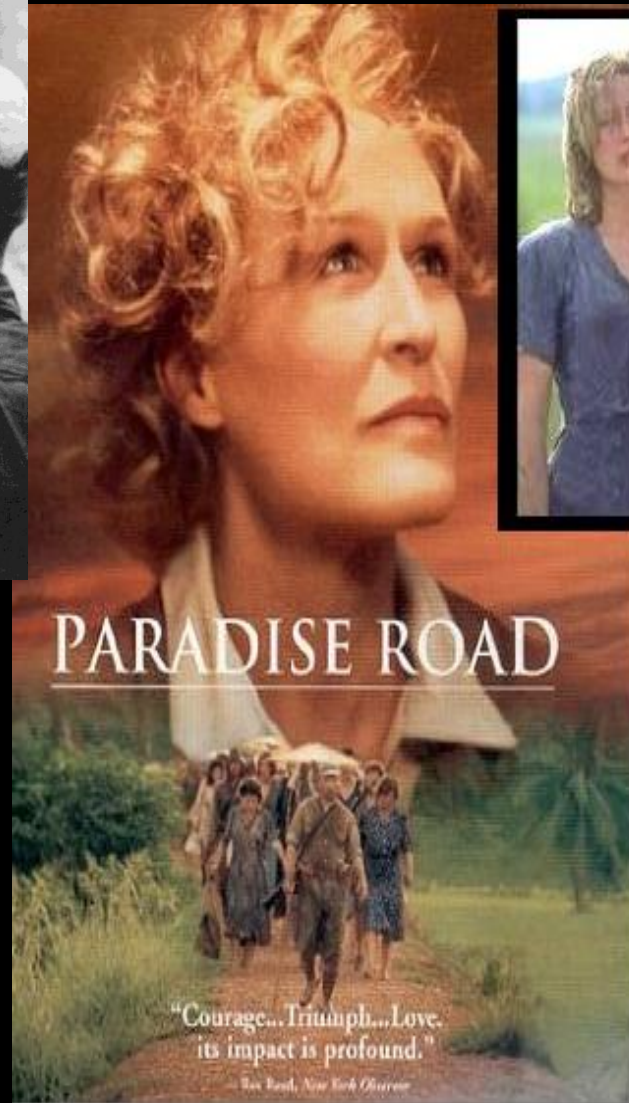
The shoehorn is both the title of the play and a **symbol of loyalty and friendship between the women**. When it **appears**, the 'distant sound of crickets' is used to provide aural context and to highlight that Sheila is hiding something. It later becomes evident that the shoe-horn was not traded for Quinine but rather for Sheila herself. This revelation generates sympathy and acknowledgement of the suffering engendered by war.

In Memorium – real people, real events



“They have survived and they’re triumphant. And I wanted that to be our final impression of them, on stage and aurally. This impression of joy and life.” **John Misto**

Filmic depiction –



'A Town Like Alice', 'Tenko' and 'Paradise Road'