




STELLA

A NEW AUSTRALIAN MUSICAL

Education Pack

StellaTheMusical.com

A landscape photograph showing a field of tall grass and yellow wildflowers in the foreground, separated from a distant valley by a wire fence. The background features rolling hills and mountains under a dramatic, cloudy sky. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

**The creators of STELLA acknowledge
the unceded lands of the Kulin Nation
and the unceded lands of the Walgul
and Ngunnawal people.**

**We acknowledge their sovereignty and
their songlines. We pay respect to their
elders and their children. We embrace
and celebrate the oldest culture in the
world.**



*‘The real purpose of art and life...or life and art...
is the enjoyment of being a human creature...’*

— Miles Franklin

CONTENTS

Welcome	04
Warnings & Support	05
Background - Source Material, Plot, Creative Team, Cast, Production & Band, the Space	06-18
Context - Time, Place, Language, Theatre History, Theatre Style, Staging Challenges	19-29
Themes - Six Key Themes with Discussion Prompts	30-38
Production - Music Design, Lighting Design, Costume Design, Set Design	39-44
Acknowledgments	45

WELCOME

This Prompt Pack is a collection of resources, provocations and activities intended to support you and your students' exploration and analysis of ***STELLA: A New Australian Musical***.

- The Background chapter includes the plot, history of the source material and the development of the musical, and information about the team.
- The Context chapter provides students with source materials, inspiration and style, and raises challenges around bringing a musical to the stage.
- The Themes chapter explores topics that have informed this work, including: artistic legacy and perseverance; the quest for female autonomy and rejection of domesticity; the power and responsibility of the written word; Australian identity and connection to the land; and social reform and political activism.
The Production chapter takes students through a comprehensive series of questions and prompts to spark their imaginings and help shape their own interpretation of the musical's staging.
- The Resources chapter provides a list of further reference material – including books, articles, documents, videos and podcasts.

The purpose of the pack is to stimulate discussion about the production, not provide answers!

Please note we reference Stella Miles Franklin, the historical woman, as Franklin, and the character (the star of the show) as Stella.

We're confident, ***STELLA: A New Australian Musical*** will be an unforgettable experience for you and your students.

See you at the theatre!

WARNINGS & SUPPORT

Much can change along the journey from concept to production, as scripts are redrafted, actors make discoveries, designers bring in new elements, and directors make changes right up to opening night.

We update content information throughout rehearsals as the show takes shape and publish this on our dedicated Content Warnings page. We encourage you to read any content we provide and explore this Prompt Pack in advance. The production does contain descriptions of violence and injury and references death and dying. We encourage you to use your best judgment when disseminating or discussing information, and make yourself and your students aware of the support offered by the following organisations:

- Beyond Blue, 1300 224 636, beyondblue.org.au
- Headspace, headspace.org.au
- Reachout, au.reachout.com
- Lifeline, 13 11 14, lifeline.org.au
- Kids Helpline, 1800 55 1800
- Suicide Callback Service, 1300 659 467, suicidecallbackservice.org.au

Please direct further questions to info@stellathemusical.com.

BACKGROUND



SOURCE MATERIAL



To create ***STELLA: A New Australian Musical***, Monique diMattina drew heavily on primary sources: Franklin's eighteen novels (notably *My Career Goes Bung*, *Cockatoos*, *All That Swagger*, *Blastus of Bandicoot*, and *Ten Creeks Run*), Franklin's plays, personal letters and diary entries. Some of these sources are collated in Jill Roe's 2010 publication 'My Congenials: Miles Franklin and Friends in Letters' and in Paul Brunton's 1996 publication *The Diaries of Miles Franklin*. Monique diMattina read Franklin's unpublished diaries and letters on site at the State Library of New South Wales, Sydney, and the National Library of Australia, Canberra.

Monique diMattina also referenced secondary sources, biographies, and commentary, particularly Jill Roe's comprehensive biography *Stella Miles Franklin: A Biography*, Verna Coleman's *Miles Franklin in America: Her (Unknown) Brilliant Career*, Marjorie Barnard's *Miles Franklin: The Story of a Famous Australian*, Sylvia Martin's *Passionate Friends* and Marilla North's *Yarn Spinners*.

To immerse in Franklin's world, Monique diMattina also read the words and works of Franklin's friends and contemporaries - Henry Lawson, Banjo Paterson, Vida Goldstein, Mary Gilmore, Jane Addams, Henry Handel Richardson, Norman Lindsay, Nettie & Vance Palmer, Dymphna Cusack, Florence James, Joseph Furphy and others.

From this rich, deep well, ***STELLA: A New Australian Musical*** was drawn.

PLOT - Act 1

*This was dealt with in my
1895 absence from Sydney. It was
serious and published in
the 30th Oct. S. W. 1895*

Messrs. Angus & Robertson,
Castlereagh St.,

Dear Sirs,

Here with a yarn which
I have written entitled
"My Brilliant (&) Career"
I would take it very kindly
if you would read it & state
whether or not it is fit for
publication.
Nothing great has been
attempted, merely a few
pictures of Australian
life with a little of that
mythical commodity

Prologue	Stella Miles Franklin appears, aged 57, dressed in late-1930s attire. She is in crisis. She gradually morphs into her teen self, dressed in 1890s farm wear. Young Stella is perched in a tree canopy, looking out over the Brindabella Valley and writing.
Act 1	We meet Stella's world and family – Mother (with baby Una attached), Pa, sister Linda and brother Norman. Stella is one of seven children, all engaged in monotonous dairy farm work, "every day the same". Mother presents as dutiful and demanding; Pa, as optimistic; Linda, as a good-hearted pal to Stella; and Norman, as comic relief. Stella is writing a book about a girl called Sybylla. Her family serves as inspiration for her book. The beauty of the Snowy Mountain country is Stella's muse.
Act 1, Scene 1	Stella is sixteen. Her poem 'Man's a Fool' has been published in the local newspaper. The family discuss this big event. Stella shares her hopes for a big life. Vida Goldstein, the famous Australian suffragist, is an inspiration – Vida's 'Votes for Women' campaign is mentioned in the newspaper. Pa encourages Stella, while Mother dampens Stella's hopes – there is no money for paper and ink.
Act 1, Scene 2	At night, the family sleeps. Stella retreats to the tree canopy to write. 'Somewhere In Between': Stella doesn't fit in the world she is born into; she must carve a separate space where she can be 'herself' - by night, in the world of imagination – somewhere in between. Mother and Pa argue. Pa has sold Stella out to work for her uncle, to pay Pa's debts. Norman ends the song pondering a small grave.

PLOT - Act 1

Act 1, Scene 3	<p>Mother and the three children are in the kitchen. We learn baby Una has died. Mother rallies the children for their lessons. The children have to use paper that Stella has already written on. Norman and Linda sing the verses Stella has written on their pages. In the verses, Stella rails against ‘God’ and men’s stupidity. Mother chastises Stella for writing silly ditties, offending others with her words and leading her siblings astray.</p> <p>‘Your Words Leave a Mark’: A cautionary song from Mother – be careful what you say, for your words leave a mark. Mother argues with Pa about money – when Mother speaks her mind, Pa leaves. We glimpse Mother’s survival struggle and desperation.</p>
ACT 1, Scene 4	<p>Stella arrives at the pub to extract Pa. Edwin Bridle, a childhood friend, is at the pub. Edwin and Stella flirt. Edwin fetches Pa. Pa has been in a fight, and lost the milk money in a bet. Stella is angry with him. Pa recites a drunken poem about ‘Brent of Bin Bin’, presents Stella with some paper and encourages her to follow her nature - to keep writing.</p> <p>‘Throw a Seed’: Pa sings of the life and legacy of a seed – things seem grim when the seed is deep in the dark soil, but then it reaches up, grows, flies and sends out other seeds. Stella uses the paper Pa gave her to finish her book.</p>
ACT 1, Scene 5	<p>Linda and Stella discuss the plot of Stella’s book. Linda is worried as Stella has written frankly about their family dynamics and situation. Stella re-assures Linda that the publishers refused the book anyway. Stella has also sent the book to Henry Lawson, but he hasn’t responded. Mother enters with Stella’s ‘hope chest’, rebuking 21-year-old Stella that the chest should be full of ‘accomplishments’ (embroidered linens, etc.) in preparation for marriage. Stella responds that she does not plan to marry.</p> <p>‘Marriage is a Crock’: Stella criticises the institution of marriage. Linda has romantic visions of marriage. Mother pushes the practical necessity for marriage. Edwin arrives with the mail. The women rush to tidy the house, stuffing various items in Stella’s hope chest. Edwin enters and offers to fix the broken door. Stella leaves the house, tripping over Edwin and falling into his arms.</p>

PLOT - Act 1

*This was dealt with in my
my absence from Sydney. It was
serious matter. I was
published at S. W. 18
Oct. 30, 18*

*Messrs. Angus Robertson,
Castlereagh St.,
Dear Sirs,
Here with a yarn which
I have written entitled
"My Brilliant Career"
I would take it very kindly
if you would read it & state
whether or not it is fit for
publication.
Nothing great has been
attempted, merely a few
pictures of Australian
life with a little of that
mythical commodity*

ACT 1, Scene 6	<p>Stella and Edwin pick themselves up. Edwin gives Stella the mail, they flirt and kiss. Then Stella notices there is a letter from Henry Lawson – he has read her book and tells her she has done a ‘big thing’.</p> <p>‘Shook It Up’: My Brilliant Career is published under the name ‘Miles Franklin’. Stella becomes famous. She is invited to Sydney and introduced to high society, including Mary Gilmore, another writer, who encourages Stella to ‘write for the people’. In 1902, legislation is passed granting Australian women the vote. Stella meets Vida Goldstein and, together, they work on women’s issues. Stella writes three new novels, including one advocating for maids’ rights, but publishers aren’t interested. Stella meets famed poet Banjo Paterson, who suggests a writing collaboration and flirts with Stella. Stella rejects Banjo’s advances. Meanwhile, Stella’s family and local community are offended by her portrayal of them in her novel. This has affected dairy sales and the Franklin family’s financial troubles have worsened. Stella tries to put things right by writing a sequel to My Brilliant Career, re-framing her family and local community in a better light. Publishers reject Stella’s new work. Stella is surrounded by rejection and criticism.</p>
ACT 1, Scene 7	<p>Edwin delivers a returned manuscript – Stella’s rejected sequel. Edwin proposes to Stella, presenting her with a ring. Stella can’t commit until she fixes the mess she has made. She asks Edwin to hold the ring.</p>
ACT 1, Scene 8	<p>Stella returns to the house with the returned manuscript, downhearted. Linda reads from the rejected manuscript, appreciating its beauty. Mother berates Stella for holding onto unrealistic dreams rather than taking practical action to improve the family’s situation. Linda defends Stella, but Stella snaps at Linda. Stella throws the manuscript in the pig slop bucket and leaves.</p>

PLOT - Act 1

This was dealt with during my absence from Sydney. It was serious and published in the Bulletin Oct. 30, 1888.

Messrs. Angus & Robertson,
Castlereagh St.,
Dear Sirs,
Here with a yarn which I have written entitled, "My Brilliant (&) Career," I would take it very kindly if you would read it & state whether or not it is fit for publication. Nothing great has been attempted, merely a few pictures of Australian life with a little of that mythical commodity

ACT 1, Scene 9	<p>Early morning. Linda seeks out Stella, comforts her, and encourages her to keep writing. Stella feels she has run out of options. Linda gives Stella a bag she has embroidered for Stella's manuscripts.</p> <p>'The Sun Climbs to Greet You': Linda reminds Stella that she has overcome setbacks in the past, that the life force in the land never fails, and the sun rises on each new day.</p> <p>Mother announces that Linda is getting married. Linda confesses she is also moving to Queensland. Linda begs Stella to come with her. Stella considers her options – Queensland? Marriage to Edwin? Or an idea Vida has planted, attempting publication in America.</p>
ACT 1, Scene 10	<p>On the gangplank, Stella farewells her family and Edwin, and leaves for America.</p> <p>'Dear Linda': A series of letters between Stella, her family and Edwin. Stella recounts her adventures in America. Linda has had a baby and is unwell. Edwin initially waits for Stella, but after a year, returns her ring. Mother and Pa urge Stella to come home. Stella stays in America, excited about her brilliant new career.</p>

PLOT - Act 2

This was dealt with during my absence from Sydney. It was serious outbreak of influenza. Oct. 30, 1918

*Messrs. Angus Robertson,
Castlereagh St.,
Dear Sirs,
Here with a yarn which I have written entitled "My Brilliant (&) Career". I would take it very kindly if you would read it & state whether or not it is fit for publication. Nothing great has been attempted, merely a few pictures of Australian life with a little of that mythical commodity*

Act 2	<p>'War To End All War': We are in a war scene - WW1 in Macedonia. Stella sings of the horror, injustice and stupidity of war. She is nursing in a field hospital. Gradually, the war hospital scene morphs into a fever dream in which the tent hospital Doctor becomes Mother, the soldiers become Pa and Norman, and the other nurse becomes Linda, who dies in Stella's arms.</p>
Act 2, Scene 1	<p>Stella wakes from a recurring nightmare, ten years after the war, in an impoverished writer's garret in Bloomsbury, London. On the radio, Virginia Woolf discusses that a woman needs a room of her own and 500 pounds to write fiction. A cleaner pokes her head in ('Hall Lady') and offers to find a handyman to fix Stella's window and doors.</p> <p>Five Hundred Pounds: Stella struggles to make ends meet, working in a café and at the National Housing Council, writing by night and suffering constant publishing rejections of her various plays and novels. We learn Stella removed My Brilliant Career from print 20 years prior for 'personal' reasons. Hall Lady gradually becomes more of a friend.</p>
Act 2, Scene 2	<p>Stella receives another rejection in the post. She takes out her frustration on Hall Lady and the handyman. Stella sends Hall Lady away, then sits in despair. She has "nowhere to move".</p> <p>'Life in the Land': Stella recalls Linda's words in 'The Sun Climbs to Greet You'. Her family gathers in her mind, bringing Stella back to her muse by singing of home, and the life in the land. Stella writes of home.</p>

PLOT - Act 2

Act 2, Scene 3	The Hall lady encourages Stella to publish the book she has written about home. Stella agrees to publish it, but not in her own name. She will publish under the name of Brent of Bin Bin.
Act 2, Scene 4	Brent of Bin Bin dominates book sales, publishing three Aussie bush novels in quick succession to popular acclaim. From Australia Pa writes to Stella in London. He is not well.
Act 2, Scene 5	<p>Stella and Hall Lady arrive at an Australian Book Fair at The Strand. The event is a panel on Brent of Bin Bin featuring celebrity writer Mary Gilmore.</p> <p>Bare It All: Mary Gilmore and 'ABC Broadcaster Frank' theorise about Brent of Bin Bin, making outlandish claims on his psychic paradoxes and motivations. Thin-skinned Stella takes offence and takes the bait, resolving to publish her next novel in her own name.</p>
Act 2, Scene 6	<p>Mother, now aged 80, stands in a rudimentary suburban kitchen. The radio announces that famed author Miles Franklin has returned to Australia following the death of her Father.</p> <p>'No one Left to Bother Me': Mother sings of loneliness, forgetfulness and feeling obsolete. Stella returns from London and is shocked to see Mother so diminished.</p> <p>Suffering from dementia, Mother thinks Stella is Linda. Norman tells Mother that Stella has returned from London. Time passes, Stella cares for Mother.</p>

PLOT - Act 2

*This was dealt with in my
my absence from Sydney. It was
serious outbreak of S. W.
published Oct. 30, 18*

*Messrs. Angus Robertson,
Castlereagh St.,
Dear Sirs,
Here with a yarn which
I have written entitled
"My Brilliant (&) Career"
I would take it very kindly
if you would read it & state
whether or not it is fit for
publication.
Nothing great has been
attempted, merely a few
pictures of Australian
life with a little of that
mythical commodity*

Act 2, Scene 7

Norman sits at the kitchen table. Next to him is Stella's old hope chest, open, with contents spilling out. Stella enters, well dressed, returning from Government House. Stella raves to Norman about her annoyance at being offered an 'OBE', while Mary Gilmore has received an award one rung higher. Norman states that Mother had died that morning. Norman is angry that Stella has prioritised her writing over Mother and the family over the years. Norman throws Stella's hope chest, scattering the contents over the room. Norman says he won't be around for Stella anymore and leaves.

Devastated, Stella falls to the floor amongst her scattered things. Gradually, she picks up pages and then notices she is holding the manuscript to her long-lost sequel – My Career Goes Bung. Stella realises Mother must have salvaged the manuscript from the pig slop bucket all those years ago.

The phone rings. Stella answers the phone with tears streaming down her face. It is Mary Gilmore, calling to praise Stella for her new novel, 'All That Swagger'. Mary thanks Stella for her important contribution to Australian writing.

'Stella, It's Miles': Stella returns to pondering the manuscript, which she notes 'is rather good'. Mary's kind words, along with the discovery of the manuscript, trigger an epiphany. Stella notes the cost she has paid for the road she chose, but reaffirms her commitment to 'find your prayer'. Stella celebrates the life in the land, that she has sung her 'native song'.

Act 2, Scene 8

A sunrise. A young writer, Dymphna Cusack, arrives at the door with a bunch of waratahs, asking for Stella's help with her book. Stella invites Dymphna in. Over time, the two women form a mentoring friendship, while we hear an ABC Radio announcement: Miles Franklin has passed away and created a 500-pound book prize to be awarded annually to a writer representing Australian life.

We hear a roll call of Miles Franklin Award prize winners from 1957 to the present.



*‘Nothing counts but character and courage...
these commodities do not change.’*

— Miles Franklin

CREATIVE TEAM

Monique diMattina	Book/ Music/ Lyrics
Julia Robertson	Director
Vicky Jacobs	Musical Director
Monique diMattina & Stephen Grant	Orchestration/Arrangements
Nick Fry	Set Design
Isla Shaw	Costume Design
Sidney Younger	Lighting Design
David Letch	Sound Design
Indigo Hunt	Assistant Director
Johnny Gardner	Assistant Musical Director

CAST

Geraldine Hakewill	Stella Miles Franklin
Johanna Allen	Mother, Dame Mary Gilmore, WW1 Doctor, London Cook
Shubshri Kandiah	Linda Franklin, Vida Goldstein, WW1 Nurse, Hall Lady, Dymphna Cusack
Joe Kosky	Pa, Voice of Henry Lawson, Banjo Paterson, Publisher, WW1 Soldier 1, BBC and ABC Radio announcers
Kaya Byrne	Norman Franklin, Edwin Bridle, High Society Man, WW1 Soldier 2, BBC Radio crooner, Publisher

PRODUCTION

Igor Zambelli	Executive Producer
Monique diMattina	Executive Producer
Matthew Henderson	Producer
Isobel Long	Stage Manager
Poppy Gordon	Deputy Stage Manager
Rhianna Louise	Assistant Stage Manager/ Props
Dylan Lumsden	Wardrobe Supervisor
Oscar McGovern	Head of Lighting
Amy Burchell	Producing Assistant

BAND

Vicky Jacobs	Piano
Roy Theaker	Violin
Kalina Krusteva	Cello
Freyja Hooper	Drums
Yunior Terry	Double Bass/violin
Stella Anning	Guitar
Steve Grant	Trumpet, Accordion

THE SPACE

The Alexander Theatre at Monash University (MPAC) features a state-of-the-art Meyer Sound Constellation active acoustic system - it's the first Australian proscenium venue with this technology, allowing for instantaneous acoustic adjustments to suit diverse performances. The system enhances sound immersion for both performers and audiences.



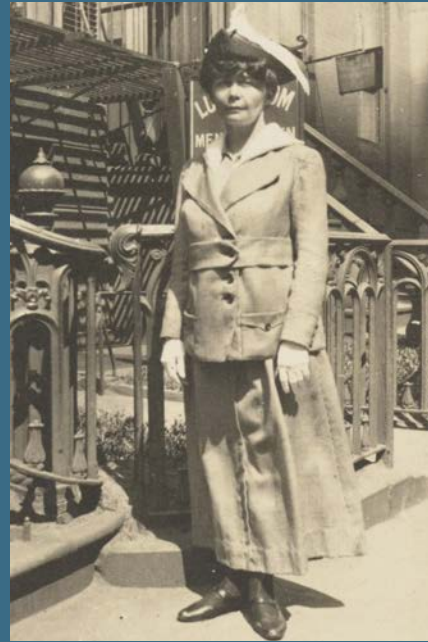
THE JAN POTTER CENTRE
FOR PERFORMING ARTS

CONTEXT



TIME

The show spans roughly 60 years, from Franklin's teenage years in 1895 to her death in 1954.



PLACE

The setting of *STELLA: A New Australian Musical* is layered and intentionally unstable — it is simultaneously a coming-of-age story, a historical recreation, a theatrical abstraction, and an exploration of what it means to be Australian in the modern world.

Geographic Locations

- Brindabella Station - Franklin's birthplace and childhood home. Although Franklin's family moved closer to Goulburn during her childhood, the play remains at Brindabella for simplicity.
- Sydney - where Franklin meets Vida Goldstein and begins her involvement with the suffragist movement.
- Chicago - where Franklin works for the National Women's Trade Union League, advocating a shorter work day, better working conditions and better wages.
- Macedonia, First World War - where Franklin serves as a nurse and cook.
- Bloomsbury, London - where an impoverished Franklin juggles two day jobs with night-time writing and pitching her work to publishers.
- Sydney 1932-1954 - where Franklin lives her last twenty years.



Brindabella Station, c.1895 - 1905



Women's Suffrage March, Chicago c.1916





Bloomsbury, London

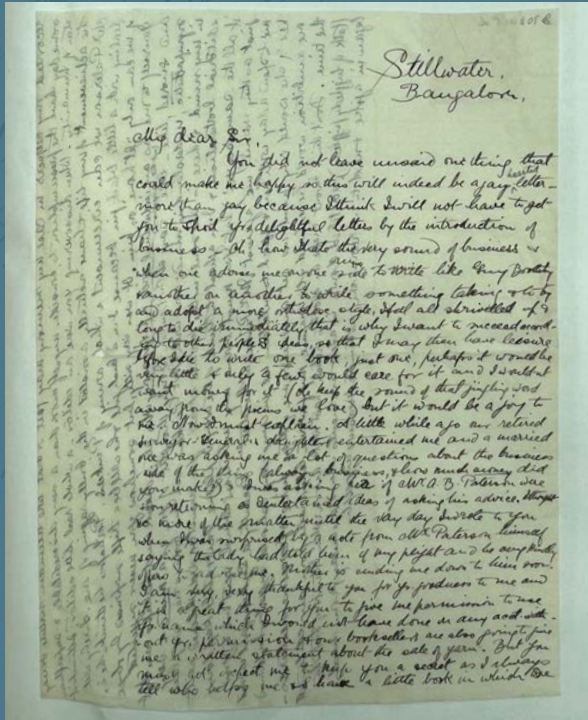


A dirt road lined with tall, slender trees leads into a green valley. The sky is filled with dramatic, dark clouds. The scene is captured in a cinematic style with a slightly desaturated color palette.

*‘Heaven could be no more majestic than
unspoiled Australia.’*

— Miles Franklin

LANGUAGE



STELLA: A New Australian Musical features a distinctive linguistic style that weaves concurrent dialogue, lyrics, and 'spoken in rhythm' sections. The mood shifts with the music. The energetic, declamatory pub bush ballad 'Marriage is a Crock' contrasts with the lyrical, elevated expansiveness of contemplative ballads like 'Somewhere in Between' and 'Life in the Land'. Stella's excitement on arriving in the USA is captured in a classic Tin Pan Alley swing — evoking the tradition of big-city numbers such as 'Gotta Dance' / *Singin' in the Rain*. The punk rock verses of 'War to End All War' are dense and percussive, while the dramatic tango and salsa rhythms of 'Bare It All' underscore the humour and brass of showbiz and celebrity life.

The dialogue in **STELLA: A New Australian Musical** balances Franklin's actual words (reflecting the everyday speech of life at the turn of the century) with a naturalistic, contemporary vernacular more accessible to a contemporary audience.

However, there are deep, subtextual layers of tension.

Franklin doesn't always say what she means, and her words often contrast with her emotions and actions. She pushes people away with her sharp tongue and 'edgy' exterior— 'It's a sign of your own worth sometimes if you are hated by the right people.' Yet she is desperate for people to see past the thorns and tell her she matters, that her work matters. This complexity in Franklin's character led Marjorie Barnard, the only one of Franklin's biographers who knew her personally, to call her 'paradoxical as a platypus'.

THEATRE STYLE

STELLA: A New Australian Musical is a highly stylised production that blends multiple theatrical forms to create an immersive theatrical experience.

The production combines elements of:

- **Poor Theatre:** Stripped-back staging that prioritises actor physicality, voice and minimal design, creating a raw, intimate experience without reliance on elaborate sets or technical effects.
- **Meta Theatre:** a form of drama that draws attention to its own theatrical nature — breaking the ‘fourth wall’ between the stage and the audience, inviting the audience to reflect not just on the story, but on the *act of watching* — and what that reveals about reality, fiction, and human nature.
- **Expressionism:** The exaggerated staging, memories and dream sequences, stylised movements prioritise Stella’s inner emotional experience over her external reality.
- **Epic Theatre:** Rather than drawing the audience into the story, Epic Theatre keeps them consciously aware that they are watching a performance — using a technique Brecht called the *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation or estrangement effect). Having musicians visible onstage is an alienation device, a reminder to the audience that they are watching a theatre production.
- **Musical Theatre:** A form of theatrical performance that combines song, spoken dialogue, acting, and dance to tell a story, with music and lyrics serving as primary dramatic tools rather than mere decoration.

Script: How many of these conventions can you identify in the written script? Choose a scene from the play and underline any moments that demonstrate the suggested conventions.

Performance: How many of these conventions can you identify in the stage interpretation of the play? Using a scene from the performance, think about the contributions of each production role (such as director, actors, designers, and musicians) and give examples of where the listed style conventions were evident. Were these choices clear? Did they effectively support the other production elements and help communicate the overall interpretation of the work?

STAGING CHALLENGES

These questions focus on the production roles of direction and design, bringing the script's complex requirements to life.

- **Character Transitions and Doubling:** The script requires the actor playing Stella to transition from age 16 to 55. Several actors double as different characters, such as Pa and Norman, appearing as injured soldiers or radio announcers. As a director, what acting skills and directorial decisions help ensure these transitions are clear and meaningful to the audience?
- **Fluidity of Location:** The production moves rapidly between the Snowy Mountains, Sydney, America, a field hospital in Macedonia, and a flat in London. How does the set designer use elements of theatre composition, such as variation and focus, to create these distinct global settings without relying on literal, heavy set changes?
- **The Symbolism of Props:** Central props, such as the 'hope chest', recur throughout the play, representing both Stella's domestic confinement and her eventual artistic legacy. How does the designer use theatre technologies to transform these mundane objects into heightened symbols during the musical?
- **Non-Naturalistic Presentations:** At times Stella hears the voice of Vida Goldstein or her family in her head. What design decisions regarding sound and lighting are made to distinguish these psychological moments from the "real-world" action of the play?
- **Musicians and Actors on Stage:** There needs to be careful collaboration between departments to ensure musicians and actors share the stage effectively. Sound design works at keeping the on-stage volume low to minimise instrumental bleed into vocal microphones. What decisions might be made to ensure musicians do not overwhelm actors' voices?

THEMES

Each theme includes a set of questions designed to open up different ways of reading the text. Use them to fuel class discussion, guide a group workshop, or frame an individual writing task.

1. Legacy and Perseverance



Franklin and Vida Goldstein

The musical explores the endurance and sacrifice required to be an artist, especially one who lacks the ‘500 pounds a year’ and a ‘room of one’s own’ prescribed by Virginia Woolf. Franklin persists through decades of obscurity, pseudonyms (as ‘Brent of Bin Bin’ and others), and personal and financial hardship. This theme culminates in the establishment of the Miles Franklin Literary Award, in which Franklin transforms her personal struggle into a lasting legacy supporting generations of Australian writers.

- The musical concludes with a montage of radio announcements naming Miles Franklin Award winners from 1957 to 2025. How did the director stage this work to transition the focus from Franklin’s individual struggle to her enduring artistic legacy?
- In the London scenes, there is a sense of frantic, cramped living. How did the set designer use the element of theatre composition space to show the lack of ‘a room of one’s own’ compared to the vastness of the Mountain Country?
- During the ‘Bare It All’ tango, Franklin is ‘undercover’ in the audience while Mary Gilmore discusses her. How did the director manipulate the actor-audience relationship to explore the theme of identity and the perseverance required to maintain her ‘Brent of Bin Bin’ persona?

2. The Quest for Female Autonomy and the Rejection of Domesticity



Franklin at her sister Linda's wedding

A central theme is Franklin's fierce resistance to the traditional expectations of womanhood in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Franklin views marriage as a 'type of death in life' and a 'parasite' that drains a woman's spirit. She repeatedly rejects domestic roles—like feeding pigs or needlework—to pursue her 'brilliant career', even when her mother warns that she is being 'selfish'. Her struggle is summarised in her assertion that she cannot do 'anything important' simply because of her gender.

- How did the designer use the physical presence of the 'hope chest' and the 'pig slop bucket' to create a visual contrast between the domestic expectations placed on Franklin and her internal aspirations for a 'brilliant career'?
- In the 'Marriage is a Crock' sequence, how did the director use movement and pacing to distinguish Franklin's fierce defiance from her sister Linda's romanticising?
- Analyse the acting skills Mother uses to establish her status as deflatingly practical. How does this portrayal serve as a theatrical foil to Stella's objective of escaping the 'monotony' of the farm?

3. Ambition and its costs

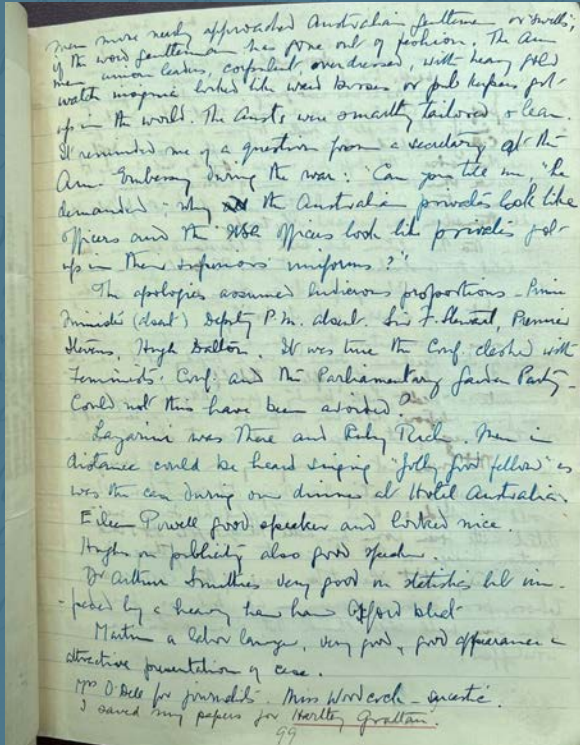


Franklin in her twenties

Is *STELLA: A New Australian Musical* the story of a hero, a cautionary tale of ambition and its costs, or both?

- Franklin was twenty one years old when *My Brilliant Career* was published. The book brought sudden fame — and a fierce backlash from family and community members who felt stung by its portrayal of them. The price of Franklin's youthful boldness was a long public silence around her most celebrated work. Franklin withdrew it from print in 1910 and, in her will, stipulated that it remain unpublished until a decade after her death.
- Franklin rejected marriage, believing it was incompatible with a woman's ability to exercise her intellect and agency. The tension between the liberation and loneliness of this choice is explored throughout the show.
- Franklin rose to become National Secretary of the Women's Trade Union League in the USA. Although Franklin believed in the importance of this work, it pulled focus from her core mission as a writer. Franklin later wrote '*for an artist [to fall among reformers] is more fatal than for a merchant to fall among bandits*'.
- For decades, Franklin published the *Brent of Bin Bin* series of Australian novels under a male pseudonym, denying authorship even to close friends. Why did Franklin cling to this mask? Did it bring artistic freedom or self-erasure?
- The sad irony at the heart of Franklin's career is that she is most remembered for *My Brilliant Career*, the novel she tried hardest to distance herself from, while her more mature and ambitious works — Eg. the *Brent of Bin Bin* series, *All That Swagger* and *My Career Goes Bung* — remain less read. Franklin's ambition to be recognised as a serious chronicler of Australian life was only partially fulfilled in her lifetime.
- How do we weigh what Franklin's ambition cost her against what was gained? Is it the fate of the artist to sacrifice a comfortable life to leave a legacy for others?

4. The Power and the Responsibility of the Written Word



The musical emphasises that 'words leave a mark' and can be as powerful as 'swords' or a 'blaze'. Stella feels an almost physical necessity to write, describing it as having 'nowhere to pour' the buckets of water she carries all day. However, this expression comes with a heavy price: her writing causes family scandals, leads to her being labelled a 'she-devil' by her community, and results in a 'pile of shame' consisting of hundreds of rejection letters.

- Stella is eventually staged standing in a 'mound' of rejection letters. How did the set designer use this visual element of theatre composition to emphasise the personal and professional cost of her artistic expression?
- Non-Naturalistic Sound: In the scenes where publishers reject Stella's work, the dialogue is spoken in rhythm. How does this directorial choice and the use of sound manipulate the actor-audience relationship to convey the systemic, machine-like barriers Stella faced?
- A major stylistic shift occurs in Act Two with the introduction of the 'Brent of Bin Bin' persona and the 'Bare It All' tango sequence. How do the acting and directorial decisions in this scene explore Stella's inner tensions around her pseudonym, and her complicated feelings about celebrity, fame and representation?

5. Australian Identity and Connection to Land



The Australian landscape, particularly the ‘Mountain Country’ of the Snowy Mountains, serves as a foundational element in the characters’ identities. Stella’s father teaches her that ‘there’s life in the land’, and her writing is celebrated for being ‘true to Australia’. The land is depicted as ‘ancient sacred siren land’ where the gum trees ‘teach her how to stand’. Even when Stella is abroad, her connection to her ‘native song’ and the ‘washing bag blue’ hills of home remains a source of spiritual strength.


- The ‘Mountain Country’ is described as an ‘ancient sacred siren land’. How did the set and lighting designers collaborate to create a non-naturalistic representation of this landscape that feels spiritually significant rather than just a literal farm setting?
- How does the script’s use of Australian history and landscape offer opportunities for a director to employ a specific theatre style (such as Epic Theatre or Poor Theatre) to convey the ‘native song’ mentioned in the text?
- Analyse the use of sound, such as the ‘orchestra of frogs and crickets’ and bird calls, in establishing the script’s specific Australian context. How did these choices enhance the audience’s understanding of Stella’s ‘native song’?
- During the War in Macedonia sequence, the ‘washing bag blue’ hills of home are described as ‘warping’ into the battlefield. How did the lighting designer use the elements of emphasis and contrast to show the psychological battle within Stella as she tries to resurrect the memory of home?

6. Social Reform and Political Activism



Franklin's journey is deeply intertwined with the suffrage and labour movements. Inspired by activist Vida Goldstein, she participates in labour law reform and women's rights. She goes 'undercover' as a lady's maid to expose the degraded conditions of working-class women. Her commitment to 'shaking the bars of the cage' is a recurring motif that represents her desire to change a world where women are exploited and disenfranchised.

- The script calls for Stella to hold placards like 'VOTES FOR WOMEN' and 'UNITY IS STRENGTH'. How does the use of these literal props reflect the conventions of Epic Theatre to engage the audience in the social reform movements of the time?
- Vida Goldstein is described as a 'vision like Lady Liberty' with 'wind in her hair'. How did the costume designer and director use theatre technology to differentiate her "vision" status from the naturalistic characters on the farm?
- Franklin's involvement with Vida Goldstein highlights early 20th-century social activism. What research into theatre history would a dramaturg need to conduct to ensure the production accurately reflects the 'VOTES FOR WOMEN' and labour law reform movements depicted in the script?
- In the 'Shook It Up' sequences, how did the use of 'concurrent dialogue' (side-by-side lyrics and speech) create a sense of social friction and political urgency for the audience?
- How do the 'spoken in rhythm' sections help to communicate a sense of political urgency to a modern audience?



*‘Someone to tell it to is one of the fundamental
needs of human beings.’*

— Miles Franklin



If Go Back
WILSON
CHILD LAIN

WE
EK
WILSON

WILSON
No WORKING WOMEN
APPLY ON THE
MILLIONAIRE S
Women Registered Oct

ANTHONY AMENDMENT
NOT ON REPUBLICAN PLATFORM
WOMEN REGISTERED OCT 7th and 17th

WHO? WHAT? WHY?
WOODROW WILSON
THE WOMEN'S VOTE
WILSON VOTED FOR SUFFRAGE
HUGHES DID NOT
WOMEN REGISTER OCT. 7th and 17th

PRODUCTION



MUSIC

*This was done with dancing
observed from the one
Sydney. It was
written out by
the author of the
other 30th 1844.*

BRUNHILDA

M. Alderton ©2022

The image displays a page of musical notation for the character Brunhilda. It features four systems of music, each with a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings like 'ppp' and 'ff'. Chord symbols are written above the vocal lines, and there are several fermatas and repeat signs throughout the score. The title 'BRUNHILDA' is centered at the top, and the composer's name 'M. Alderton ©2022' is in the top right corner.

Unlike most musical theatre shows, ***STELLA: A New Australian Musical*** started with music.

A suite of songs inspired by moments in Stella Miles Franklin's life and aspects of her character was written and performed as a narrative concert. The challenge to evolve the work into a musical theatre piece was to plot a dramatic arc rather than a chronological sweep of Franklin's seventy years. Once the story had been plotted, with themes of legacy and artistic sacrifice, many of the initial songs did not fit the work, so new songs were written.

The musical genre span is wide, not just because Stella Miles Franklin's life traversed so many years, musical eras and continents, but also because the emotional landscape explored is complex and expansive (see discussion above re. 'Language'). The result is a musical palette spanning neo-classical expression, bush ballads, tango/salsa, punk rock, percussive spoken word, pop and traditional music theatre show tunes. Each genre choice is made to take the audience on a heart journey with Stella.

Mythical commodity

LIGHTING DESIGN

The lighting design for *STELLA: A New Australian Musical* explores the central tension between the physical ‘monotony’ of the Australian farm and the expansive, spiritual magic of the ‘Mountain Country’. To achieve this, the design utilises ‘**Expressionist**’ conventions to manifest Stella’s internal psychological worlds and the magical status of figures like Vida Goldstein, distinguishing these moments through isolated, ethereal side lighting and repeated colour motifs.

A recurring ‘washing bag blue’ evokes the ‘ancient sacred siren land’, which then warps and contrasts during the Macedonia sequence to reflect Stella’s internal psychological battle.

This heightened palette contrasts sharply with the grounded, naturalistic treatment of ‘real’ characters, further underscoring the theatricality of Stella’s journey. To support the production’s ‘**Epic Theatre**’ elements, the design adopts high-intensity, harsh lighting during the suffrage and labour reform scenes to amplify the political urgency of the rhythmic dialogue and the literal presence of placards.



COSTUME DESIGN



STELLA: A new Australian Musical has 45 characters and only five actors. Costuming was required to communicate a character's personality, cue a character change, and often to indicate a jump in time and place. As the actors remain on stage for the duration of the show, the costume props needed to be quick to put on and take off. We felt the simplicity of this approach also reflected the scarcity of the times, where people (particularly from poor, rural families) would have had limited wardrobes.

We looked for something essential and iconic for each character—a hat, a hairstyle, a colour, a jacket (maybe buttoned halfway for one character, then all the way for another). The costumes remain true to the period's overall silhouette and fabrics; each layer builds on a base shape, allowing for multiple changes.

SET DESIGN



The conceptual design for *STELLA: A New Australian Musical* embraces a theatrical language where memory, imagination, and reality blur.

The stage is populated with scattered furniture - chairs, tables, and cupboards - which are not fixed in purpose but become storytelling devices, supporting a highly stylised performance language in which actors actively transform the world through interaction.

At its core, the design reflects the life of a creative being as a celebration of process, foregrounding the act of making, unmaking, and rebuilding. Stage mechanics are intentionally exposed so the audience witnesses the play constructing and deconstructing itself in real time, mirroring the shaping of an epic and creative life through memory and imagination.

This approach creates a dynamic tension between the domestic and the poetic, where humble, everyday objects sit in contrast with heroic landscape. These domestic devices are continually reimagined in ways that reflect Stella's impulse to transcend the ordinary and inhabit a more mythic, expressive world-building. Stella creates her world by standing on objects, climbing over them, and using her imagination to transform them.

The semi-circular, amphitheatre-style staging echoes the topography of the Brindabella Valley, embedding the natural landscape into the form of the set itself. The upstage wall operates dually as both the distant mountains and, when paired with the flown header piece, a visual metaphor for torn paper, evoking the act of writing, memory, and boundless horizons in a non-literal expression.

The onstage band further reinforces this fluid theatrical world, with performers remaining visible and integrated into the space. When not in a scene, actors sit amongst the musicians, blurring the boundaries between storyteller and observer, and underscoring the continuous, communal act of bringing Franklin's story to life.

1/2 page
 This was dealt with during
 my absence from Bangalore,
 Sydney. It was the one for
 serious on the one for
 Messrs. Angus & Robertson,
 Publishers of N. S. W.
 Castlebragh St.,
 Mar. 30th 1894.

Dear Sirs
 Here with a yarn which
 I had written for "The
 "My Brilliant Career"
 I would like it very kindly
 if you would read it & state
 whether or not it is fit for
 publication.
 Nothing great has been
 attempted, merely a few
 pictures of Australian
 life with a little of that
 mythical commodity

'I don't care a magpie's squawk what any
 paper says of me.'

— Miles Franklin

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

STELLA has been developed with the commissioning support of Igor Zambelli, and additional funding from Creative Australia, the City of Melbourne, Monash University, Cassy Liberman, Janet Whiting and Phil Lukies, the Robert Salzer Foundation and various private donors.

Thanks to the State Library of New South Wales for use of images of Stella Miles Franklin and samples of her handwriting.

Photography by Monique diMattina.





StellaTheMusical.com