



**ADELAIDE
FESTIVAL**

28 FEB - 15 MAR 2020

Aleppo. A Portrait of Absence

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EDUCATION RESOURCE

Resource developed by
Deanne Bullen 2020

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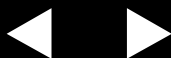


Image: Pierre Yves Massot

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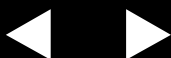
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Show rundown

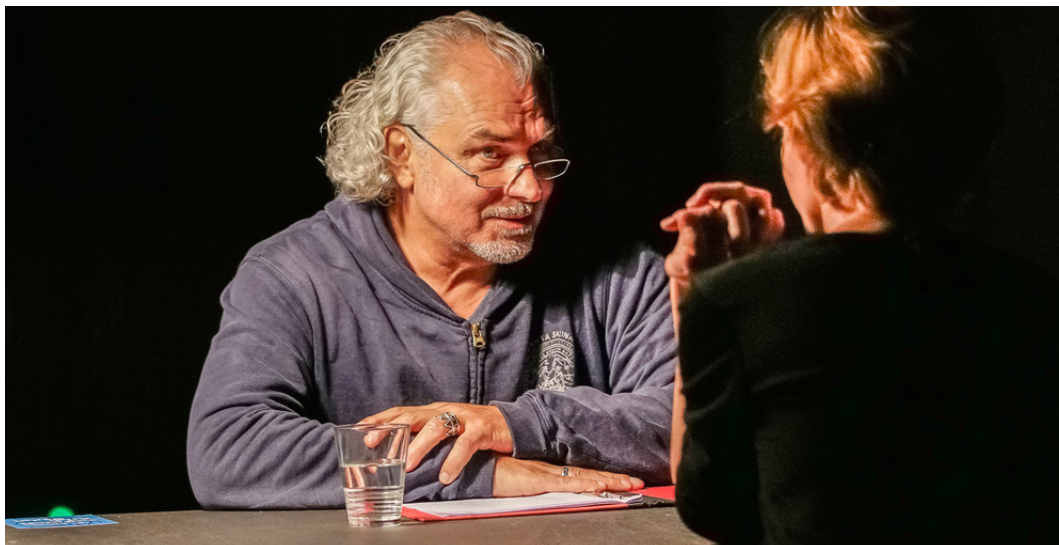
Australian Premiere / Australian Exclusive

Duration – 35 minutes no interval

Ten actors 'perform' ten stories - the story you will hear is the result of your choice of a point on a huge city map. You will hear the story one to one - just you and the storyteller. The act of telling, the necessity of listening, is everything.

Cities are shaped by the stories and memories people have of them. They stick in the mind only as a melding of the lived, the imagined, the forgotten, and the desired. The only things that remain are the stories. Starting from that notion, Syrian writer and dramaturge Mohammad Al Attar has interviewed inhabitants of the city of Aleppo, asking them about a place dear to them. The result of this undertaking is a set of intimate one-on-one performances comprised of tales and testimonies from Aleppo. It is also a reflection upon language itself, the need to speak and to listen. Stories can preserve the beautiful, encourage the listeners to piece together images on their own, and give them the freedom to reconstruct a place which perhaps no longer exists.

These are not horror stories. They are simple, personal testimonies of places loved – once home to Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen, Armenians and Assyrians; a unique melting pot of Islam, Orthodox Christianity, Catholicism and more.



Aleppo – is a city in northern Syria. It is the second largest city in Syria after Damascus and one of the oldest inhabited cities in history.

Al-Madina Souq is the covered souq (souk) market located at the heart of the Syrian city of Aleppo within the walled ancient part of the city – largest covered historic market in the world – approximate length 13 kms.

Restoration on the devastated market place began in 2018.

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Themes

Aleppo. A Portrait of Absence compels you to explore how much we have in common when we speak about themes of loss, absence, nostalgia, places we hold dear, and the layers behind them.

In al Attar's words: "Our memories and stories help us keep the places we have left behind, or that become estranged from us, fresh and alive. They also help us safeguard our relationship with our home against huge distortions. Perhaps we can say our stories preserve beauty in the face of spreading ugliness."

Production

Style and Conventions

Aleppo. A Portrait of Absence uses verbatim theatre with stories collated from interviews with people from the once vibrant, now utterly destroyed, city of Aleppo.

Set Design

Intimate space for 10 actors and their listeners – a table, two chairs and a single desk light. Nothing causes distraction, no images, no music, and no movement.

Curriculum links and activities

This education resource has been developed for SACE Stage 1 and 2 – the resources are created with links and in relation to the subject outlines. The resource aims to provide teachers with information to help prepare students before attending the performance, as well as structured learning activities for the classroom after viewing the performance.

SACE

PA1 Expression and communication of ideas relevant to the program focus.

II2 Interpretation of the ideas of creative arts practitioners.

R2 Reflection on personal creative arts ideas, opinions, and skills relevant to the program focus.

IB – Theatre Standard Level

Participate in at least one production of a collaboratively created piece of original theatre, created from a starting point, which is presented to others.

SACE

KU1 Knowledge and understanding of core concepts specific to relevant creative arts discipline (s)

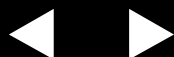
PA4 Development and application of practical skills, techniques, processes and technologies.

II2 Interpretation of the ideas of creative arts practitioners.

R1 Appraisal of creative arts products in terms of practitioners' ideas, processes, and decision-making.

IB – Theatre Higher Level

Practically examine the performance conventions of at least one world theatre tradition and apply this to the staging of a moment of theatre.



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Theatre Etiquette

The French word etiquette, and it's second meaning, was adopted by English speakers in the middle of the 18th Century – "requirements for proper behaviour."

This can sound a bit formal but having an understanding of "theatre etiquette" helps an audience know what to expect and how to get the most out of their theatre experience.

Why does it matter?

It respects other audience members attending the performance.

It shows respect to the performers. Don't forget – you can see them, and they can see you!

It acknowledges the hard work that it takes to bring a live performance together, by everyone.

It often includes a long list of people.

What are theatre etiquette expectations?

Depending on the age of an audience the expectations can vary. Theatre designed for very young audiences, think 2 to 8 year olds, will have different expectations. Often the theatre experience for younger audiences will invite and encourage participation. However, as the content becomes more complex and audiences mature, think 9 years and older, there is an expectation that students will have developed an understanding of enthusiastic participation and deliberate disruption.

What makes going to a live performance different to going to the cinema?

Many audience members have probably been to see a movie but might not have been to a live theatre performance. The BIG difference is that the actors are live and are there with you in the moment. Don't forget to show your appreciation. If it's funny, it's okay to laugh. If the actors invite you to respond, then it's okay to respond. Sometimes it can also be sad so if you know it's going to be sad don't forget to bring a tissue or two.

What to expect:

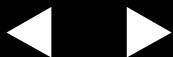
An usher will help you find your seat and you need to follow their directions. You will know the performance is about to start and that you need to settle and be quiet when the lights begin to dim or you hear a voice over or sounds.

Turn off your mobile phone. Avoid eating or rustling food packaging.

Try to cover coughs and sneezes. Go to the toilet before you go into the theatre.

Photographing and filming is not permitted and here are a couple of reasons why:

- It can disturb the actors on the stage and break their concentration
- Intellectual property is paramount. The production on stage is intellectual property of the theatre, therefore you are not allowed to take photos of it
- You will be missing out on the detail you can't see through the viewfinder



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Performance Literacy

Art is a means of expressing emotion, a way of transmitting feelings, culture, beliefs and values between the creators and performers of the work and the audience. There is some art, which is created for the explicit purpose of eliciting a strong emotional response from the audience. There are a myriad of emotions that students can experience when they are viewing live theatre from happiness to anger, surprise, annoyance, just to name a few.

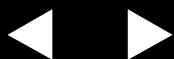
Students might ask - but how is live theatre different from watching films in a cinema?

The difference is that actors are real people telling stories on stage, the audience is with the actor in the moment. [Recent research from the University of Arkansas](#), published in Educational Researcher, which spanned two years and followed school groups who attended live theatre performance or a movie version of the same story revealed significant differences. Students attending live performances experienced an increase in tolerance as well as a greater understanding of the plot and vocabulary of stories.

[Live Theatre Improves Learning and Tolerance](#)

As students engage with and watch live theatre they develop a deeper understanding of the language of the theatre. They develop literacies allowing them to 'read' the gestures and movements of a performer, develop an understanding of the intention of the set, costume, or lighting designer, or reflect on what the playwright or directors intended meaning of a setting or character could be. The [Before the Show](#) activities, for the Adelaide Festival show you are attending, are designed to support students to develop these literacy skills, knowledge and understanding.

The [After the Show](#) activities are designed to provide students with the opportunity to discuss, analyse and comprehend their responses to the show. Having a strong knowledge and understanding of theatre terminology will support students.



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Questions to get you thinking

What do you know about Aleppo:

- Where in the world is Aleppo and which country is it in?
- What is the ancient history of Aleppo? (3300BC to 600 AD)
- What is the modern history of Aleppo? (16th Century to today)
- What has been happening in Aleppo between 2012-2016?
- Why is Aleppo a world heritage site?
- Why is Aleppo important?

Collaborative Jigsaw learning activity. (Students sharing and teaching others)

The process is great for learning a large range of information and sharing the load.

Process

1. Class is split into groups – approximately five in a group. Class of 25 would be 5 students in 5 groups.
2. Each group has a focus for their research and needs to decide how they are going to collect and share the information, for example:
 - How to explain information
 - What diagrams, maps or prints of photographs are required
 - What keywords or definitions will need to be explained?
3. Once each group has completed their research they are ready to re-group to share. One student from each group forms the new groups to share with each other.

Stage 1

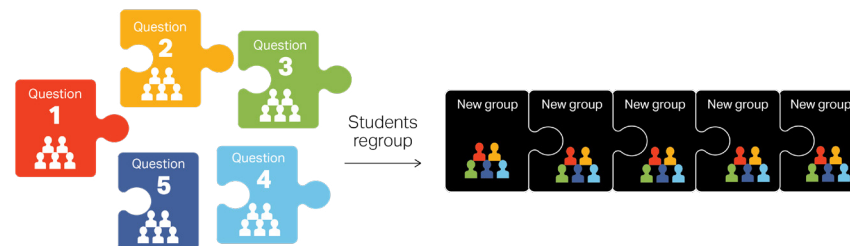
- Each group selects one of the questions from – What do you know about Aleppo?
- When each group believes they are “experts” in their question they regroup to teach and learn from others.

Stage 2

- Students should check they have one expert from each group at their table. Students present their information to each other.

Stage 3

- Whole class discussion about what they have found out.



“War does not determine who is right – only who is left.”

Bertrand Russell, British philosopher.

Tracks of the old Silk Road

Located between the eastern Mediterranean coast and the Euphrates valley Aleppo was at the crossroads of several trade routes since the millennium B.C. and a key centre along the great Silk Roads.

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Head start on the research

[Ancient city of Aleppo](#)

[Timeline of Aleppo](#)

[New World Encyclopedia – Aleppo](#)

[BBC News – Syria war: Artillery fire kills nine at school in rebel-held Idlib](#) – 2 January 2020

[Relief Web – Syria in 2020: the deadly legacy of explosive violence and its impact on infrastructure and health](#). 17 December 2019.

[Vice News – a story about a French restoration company working with locals to restore their most important cultural artefacts](#). 21 February 2019.

[The New Yorker – A traveller's record of Syrian monuments before the war](#). 26 May 2018

[A Monumental Loss: Here are the most significant cultural heritage sites that ISIS has destroyed to date](#). May 30, 2017

[Smithsonian Magazine – the race to save Syria's archaeological treasures](#). March 2016

[World Economic Forum – 9 years in, 9 things to know about the Syrian civil war](#). 20 March 2019



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Students devise their own Verbatim Theatre pieces

Process for creating your product

Working in small group (3 to 4 depending on the story)

1. Deciding on the issue:

- identify current, local, national or international issue that have affected people. (A recent survey of big issues for youth in Australia – bushfires, climate change, sexism, poverty, unemployment, the future for young people and bullying.)
- check newspapers and online for points of view
- discuss the big issues the group has identified and decide on ONE issue.

2. Writing the interview questions.

Questions need to generate stories that investigate the issue.
For example:

- Tell me about....
- Do you remember the first time you met them....
- When did you first hear about....
- How did you know when....
- Is there any question I should have asked....

Questions to avoid:

- Closed questions that only require a one word answer.
- Questions that only generate opinions rather than stories.

3. It's all about the interviewee.

- Identify who you are going to interview – make sure there are a range of voices and stories.
- Contact interviewees

- describe your project
- invite them to be involved
- discuss the interview process, i.e. they can say no to answering a question, they will see/hear any interview material and be able to decline it being used, they will see the final product
- make a time.
- Conducting interview
- Check you have ALL the equipment you need for recording the interview and that it's charged and working
- Check your interviewees are comfortable.

TIP Don't make it conversational – you won't tell their story not yours!

Verbatim theatre is a form of documentary theatre which is based on the spoken words of real people. Verbatim theatre-makers use real people's words from recorded interviews. Writers often combine interview material with invented scenes, or use reported and remembered speech as well.

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4. **Editing and making decisions** Groups listen to their interviews and discuss how they are going to use them in their performance. (Try out different ideas, music, Images).

Listen/watch interviews and discuss how the interviews might be used.

Following are examples of how interviews have been used to tell stories.

- [Monkey Bars](#) – portrait of modern Britain from the perspective of the new generation.
- [Beautiful One Day](#) – is a theatrical documentary about the irrepressible life and times of Palm Island. Three theatre companies (Belvoir, Ilbjerri, and version 1.0) came together in 2011 over a shared sense of outrage at the injustices surrounding a death in custody in 2004.
- [Memorial High School United States](#) – student work on document theatre looking at empathy. Empathy is an invisible entity, as thin as air. It helps us to see through the eyes of others, to “walk in their shoes,” to recognize that each of us are individuals with diverse and complex story lines.

5. Where are the gaps

- Do you have the whole story - is there anything missing – do you need someone else's voice?
- Identify any other interviews that need to be gathered.

6. Decide – edit – write – rehearse – perform

- Decide – how it's all going to fit together
- Edit – select the interviews you will use
- Write – the script - select music or any other visuals
- Rehearse
- Perform



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After the show

Working in small groups:

Utilising the Jigsaw collaborative sharing model, used in the Before the Show activity, students move into groups to share with their experience and memories of *Aleppo. A Portrait of Absence*.

- The story they listened to
- The memory they shared.

As a whole class:

Discuss what they have found out from the Jigsaw group discussions.

Individually students read one or more of the interview with Mohammad Al Attar:

[Belluard Bollwerk International - interview with Mohammad Al Attar:](#)

- What is your relationship to the city of Aleppo?
- How did you meet the people telling the stories?
- Why did you choose to tell these stories through actors who haven't any connection to Aleppo? How did you choose them? Are there specific criteria?
- In this piece, chance is what leads the public to discover a place in Aleppo. Is this a way to restore the phenomenon of strolling around the city, walking around aimlessly and discovering things by chance? If so, why did you choose to do it this way?
- How does the map help to enter the memories shared?
- A very important part of the performance revolves around the voice. What role do voices play in the face of absence?
- Why did you choose to tell these stories one-to-one rather than telling them directly to a wide audience?

[Open Art - Interview with Mohammad Al Attar, Antigone Dramaturg](#)

[Interview with Mohammad Al Attar and his views on justice, the relationship between documentation and fiction and his play The Factory.](#)

Writing the review to *Aleppo. A Portrait of Absence*

Drawing on the conversations from the Jigsaw groups, whole class discussion and reading one or more of the interviews with Mohammad Al Attar students write a review of *Aleppo. A Portrait of Absence*.

The framework provided, [Guide for Writing a Theatre Response](#), will support students to plan and develop their critical responses and organise their information.



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Meet the Company

Concept and text: Mohammad Al Attar

Mohammad Al Attar is a Syrian playwright and journalist. He has a degree in literature from Damascus University and an MA in Applied Drama from Goldsmiths University in London. His plays, including *Withdrawal*, *Online*, *Could you Please Look into the Camera?*, *A Chance Encounter*, and others have been adapted for performances on stage in London, New York, Seoul, Berlin, Brussels, Tunisia, Athens, and Beirut.

Al Attar's career as a writer includes numerous contributions to many magazines and newspapers, recently with a special focus on the Syrian revolution.

Collaboration with the director: Omar Abusaada

Omar Abusaada is a theater director. Working as a playwright and director, he co-founded the group Studio Theatre in 2002 whose first show, *Insomnia*, premiered in 2004. Since 2007, Abusaada has been collaborating with Mohammad Al Attar. Interested in building a politically and socially conscious theater, his work brings together the Syrian dramatic tradition and new practices such as contemporary writing and documentary theater. He directed numerous performances, i.a. *While I Was Waiting* (2016), *Antigone of Shatila* (2014), *Syria Trojan Women* (2013), *Intimacy* (2013), *Could You Please Look into the Camera?* (2012), *Look at the streets ... this is what hope looks like* (2011), and *El affich* (2006). His works have been presented at various international festivals.

Scenographer: Bissane Al Charif

Bissane Al Charif, born in Paris 1977, graduated from the faculty of Architecture at Damascus University in 2001. Then studied Set Designing (Scenography) in the Department of Graduate Studies at the School of Architecture in Nantes.

Born in France to Palestinian parents and growing up in Syria has enriched her artistic view and given her a unique artistic vision and a clear appearance in her working style.

Since 2013 she has lived in France working as a stage designer and an independent artist. She is the set designer of several theater pieces such as *While I was Waiting* (2017), and *The Factory* by Omar Abusaada at the Volksbuehne, Berlin (2018) and *Aleppo. A Portrait of Absence*.

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Additional Resources

Reviews

[Arab Stages review – Why are we here now. AND A portrait of absence.](#)

[The Memory of Hope](#)

[What Does Theater Mean for the Revolution?](#)

Books to read

[The Girl from Aleppo – Nujeen Mustafa.](#) A teenager born with cerebral palsy, whose harrowing journey from war-ravaged Syria to Germany in a wheelchair is a tale of fortitude, grit, and hope that lends a face to the greatest humanitarian issue of our time, the Syrian refugee crisis.

[The Last Sanctuary in Aleppo: A remarkable true story of courage, hope and survival - Alaa Aljaleel](#)

[Dear World: A Syrian Girl's Story of War and Plea for Peace - Bana Alabed](#)

[We Crossed a Bridge and It Trembled: Voices from Syria - Wendy Pearlman](#)

Guide for Writing a Critical Response

Opening Paragraph

When	
What	
Where	
Plot Overview of the production and the intent of the playwright... The artistic contributors – director, set designer, lighting, costume	

Language Features:

- Usually in past tense
- Uses subject-specific language
- Descriptive language
- Third person voice
- Analytical language
- Modality (how certain we are about something)
- Cast and crew referred to by their full names or last name
- In text references (quotes or specific moments)

1st Paragraph - Who

How theatrical elements are communicated through the actors...	
Actor's name	
Character they played	
Discuss how they engage the audience - movement, voice	
Give examples	

2nd Paragraph - What else

Describe a key moment or scene from the production	
How were the theatrical elements combined to communicate meaning to the audience?	

3rd Paragraph - Technical aspects

Describe a key moment or scene from the production.	
How were sets, lights, props and costumes used to communicate meaning to the audience?	

Concluding Paragraph - Summarises the viewers opinion

Your overall thoughts about the production. Note: This is not a rating of the production.	
What made it stand out?	
What did it make you think?	