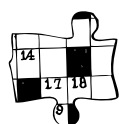


# *What I Wrote: Katherine Thomson*



A **STUDY GUIDE** by KATY MARRINER



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## Introduction

This study guide to accompany *What I Wrote: Katherine Thomson* has been written for senior secondary students. It provides information and suggestions for learning activities in English, Literature, Theatre Studies and Drama.

*What I Wrote: Katherine Thomson* is a short film about Australian playwright Katherine Thomson. Dr Tess Brady interviews Thomson and provides a critical introduction to *Harbour, Answered by Fire, Mavis Goes to Timor* and *Wonderlands*. *What I Wrote: Katherine Thomson* also includes a discussion of some of Thomson's other plays and an investigation of her approach to writing for the stage.

*What I Wrote: Katherine Thomson* is one title from a four-part series spotlighting Australian playwrights. The series offers students information about the ideas and processes of the playwrights, as well as the opportunity to hear what the playwrights have to say about their work. Other titles available in the *What I Wrote* series include:

- *What I Wrote: Matt Cameron*
- *What I Wrote: Louis Nowra*
- *What I Wrote: Hannie Rayson*

Further information about the series can be found at <<http://www.whatiwrote.com.au>>.

### Katherine Thomson

Katherine Thomson is an Australian playwright and screenwriter. She began her career as an actor with the Australian Theatre for Young People in 1969. After writing her first play *A Change in the Weather*, Thomson was commissioned by Film Australia to write the film adaptation. Thomson's theatre works include *Diving for Pearls, Harbour, Navigating, Barmaids, Mavis Goes to Timor* and *Wonderlands*. She has also written extensively for television. Her television screenplay credits include *Grass Roots, Wildside, Blackjack, Halifax f.p., Fallen Angels, G.P.* and *Something in the Air*. Thomson was the co-writer of the television series *Answered by Fire* and wrote

the screenplay for the film *Unfolding Florence – The Many Lives of Florence Broadhurst*. She has been Vice-President of the Australian Writers' Guild and President of Sydney PEN.

## About the filmmakers

### Dr Tess Brady – Presenter

Dr Tess Brady is a highly respected editor, researcher and teacher of writing at university level. She was the co-founding editor of the international online scholarly journal TEXT and has published children's picture books, adult radio drama, crime fiction, short stories and popular non-fiction. Her most recent publication is *Creative Writing: Theory beyond practice*, with Nigel Krauth.

### Catherine Gough-Brady – Director

Catherine Gough-Brady is a documentary filmmaker. She has made works for a variety of media. Gough-Brady has produced and directed educational videos and web sites. Her 'docugame' *Docks Dispute* <<http://www.docksdispute.com>> is currently used in tertiary management and industrial relations courses.

## Using *What I Wrote: Katherine Thomson* in the classroom

### The writer's context

'Katherine isn't interested in the high and mighty.'

– Dr Tess Brady

- As you view *What I Wrote: Katherine Thomson*, compile a list of statements that describe Thomson's place in society.
- Use the internet, critical essays and commentaries to compile a detailed summary of the contexts that shape Thomson's work as a playwright. Discuss your findings with others in the class.
- Drawing on one of Thomson's plays, determine how Thomson's experience of and attitudes to the world in which she lives have influenced the

construction of the text. Work in a small group to complete the analysis. Develop a PowerPoint presentation to communicate this information to the class.

### Views and values

- Drawing on *What I Wrote: Katherine Thomson* and your knowledge of Thomson's plays, make a list of the issues that Thomson has brought to audiences' attention.
- Do you think Thomson's plays have the power to influence people's response to real world events and issues?
- Thomson is interested in writing plays about people and how they deal with change. Her plays are about how ordinary people respond to social, economic and political change. Thomson invites her audiences to consider what happens when the personal collides with the bigger issues. Drawing on the play that you are studying, create an annotated visual display that explores Thomson's portrayal of change.
- The dissident walks through Thomson's plays – the whistleblower, the unionist and the activist occupy her stage. Complete a detailed analysis of one of Thomson's dissidents. Turn your analysis into a monologue in which the character articulates his or her views and values.

### Critical perspectives

Use the internet, critical commentaries and reviews to arrive at a detailed knowledge and understanding of the critical reception of Thomson's writing. What viewpoints do you support? What viewpoints do you refute?

### The plays

#### *Answered by Fire*

Mark Waldman is an Australian policeman who volunteers for the United Nations Mission in East Timor. When he is put in charge of the Civilian Police at the UN base in Nunura, he meets Julie Fortin, a Canadian policewoman on her first overseas mission, and Ismenio Soares, a Timorese translator assigned to work with the unit. When the vote is in favour of independence, the Indonesian military and its militias cause chaos. The UN evacuates, forcing Mark and Julie to abandon Ismenio and his family.

*Answered by Fire* is inspired by real stories. Thomson co-wrote the television mini-series with Canadian writer Barbara Samuels.

- Watch *Answered by Fire*. What were your favourite scenes? Why?
- Drawing on pertinent quotations from *Answered by Fire*, generate a discussion of the mini-series portrayal of the political and the personal stories.

- In 1999, after twenty-five years of forced occupation, East Timor won the right to vote for independence from Indonesia. The United Nations sent in a group of volunteers to supervise and protect the ballot. They promised the East Timorese that they would stay after the vote, regardless of the outcome. It was a promise they couldn't keep.

Use electronic and print texts to investigate East Timor's vote for independence and the consequences of this bid for freedom.

- The hero heads home – without the girl. Was this the ending you expected?
- '*Answered by Fire* is a story of faith, fear and the extraordinary strength of the human spirit.' What moments and statements in the play show this to be true?


#### *Harbour*

A dying of ideals. A confusion about the future.'

– Dr Tess Brady

*Harbour* is set during the 1998 Patrick Dispute. The play documents the drama of the dispute: the picket lines, the covert training of ex-army personnel in Dubai, the midnight takeover of the wharves by balaclava-clad guards with guns and dogs and the training of a scab labour force.





Thomson uses this backdrop to tell the story of a wharfie family. Sandy hasn't been home for six years. He returns to find his family divided. His wife doesn't want to know him and his children have not only grown up but have grown away from his political values. The world has changed and Sandy isn't sure about where he stands.

- Thomson's characters are flawed but that is what makes them human. Compile a profile for one of Thomson's characters. Use moments and statements from the play to describe and explain the character's nature and behaviour.
- As the funeral pyre catches fire, what else goes up in flames?
- The Federal Government and Patrick were united in their decision to smash the Maritime Union of Australia. Use print and electronic media texts to investigate the dispute and how it polarized the nation.
- 'Harbour is a vivid exploration of family, belief and identity.' Is this how you see the play?

### **Mavis Goes to Timor**

Mavis Taylor was an 86-year-old grandmother and retired haberdasher when she decided to take affirmative action and help alleviate the suffering of the Timorese. Thomson's play *Mavis Goes to Timor* portrays what happens when Mavis takes her sewing machines to Timor. She confronts the devastation caused by the military occupation, disregards the bureaucratic red tape and does not give in to self-doubt.

Thomson created *Mavis Goes to Timor* with Angela Chaplin and Kavisha Mazzella.

- Thomson's play was inspired by a documentary called *Mavis Goes to Timor*. View the documentary. What moments of the documentary do you find inspiring?
- 'Mavis' story is an affirmation that spirited, committed people, no matter what their age, can make a

difference.' Discuss this assessment of *Mavis Goes to Timor* by drawing on moments and statements from the play.

### **Wonderlands**

'Old friends are facing new animosities.'

– Dr Tess Brady

'This is a play about history. About how history shapes us, how we become our own history.'

– Dr Tess Brady

*Wonderlands* is a play about belonging. Thomson portrays the complexity of ownership and inheritance. *What I Wrote: Katherine Thomson* acknowledges that Thomson wanted her audience to feel tugged between a battle of histories.

The Yirralong people have lodged a native title claim for their ancestral land. Lon, a third-generation pastoralist fears that his dream of passing the family property Ambertrue on to his son-in-law will be destroyed.

- 'This is history, Sandra, history. Bit of advice. Lugging history on your back's a sure-fire way to become a pain in the neck.'

Use this quotation to begin the class' discussion of *Wonderlands*.

- Brady suggests that Alice is too much of a 'goodie goodie' for her liking. What's your opinion of Alice?
- 'We have to find new ways to move forward.' Is this the message of *Wonderlands*?

### **Diving for Pearls**

'A play about change and how we cope with it.'

– Dr Tess Brady

An industrial plant is closing down not because it is inefficient or the company is running at a loss, but because the site has become prime real estate value. Den, the quiet plodder is now facing an uncertain future. He doesn't want to change. Barbara does. The

problem is that her ambitions are unrealistic.

- ‘And I don’t mind Housing Commission, I never have, but we’ve all lived in each other’s pockets for too long. I’ve won every prize at bingo, I’ve borrowed every decent video, and I’m starting to go off the football ...’

Why is Barbara’s solution different and doomed to fail?

- ‘I didn’t want to write about victims.’  
– Katherine Thomson

Examine the role the characters of *Diving for Pearls* play in their own downfall.

- Do you think *Diving for Pearls* is an angry play?

### Navigating

‘This is a play that reminds us that our own histories are made up of the good and bad we do.’

– Dr Tess Brady

Bea wants to build a monument but the town doesn’t want to remember the boating accident that claimed life. The past is painful and the residents see no reason to revisit the tragedy. To complicate matters, Bea finds herself in possession of damaging documentary evidence exposing corruption and buried secrets. Her world begins to crumble.

*Navigating* is about the role and importance of memory. Thomson asks, if we don’t remember what happened in the past how can we strive for a better world?

- Define the term ‘whistleblower’. Can you think of any real world examples?
- What does *Navigating* tell us about memory?
- ‘Silence is as damaging as speech.’ Do you agree? Draw on moments and statements from the play to support your evaluation.

### The writing process

- ‘I quite like to have a plan, even if I divert from it.’  
– Katherine Thomson

Drawing on Thomson’s statements in *What I Wrote: Katherine Thomson*, discuss how she creates and structures the drama.

- Naturalism is the re-creation of real life or life as it is onstage. It seeks to reproduce realistic characters, situations or conflicts and usually occurs in real time with sets, props and costumes that are representative of the situation, place or period. Drawing on one of Thomson’s plays, find evidence to contribute to a discussion of Thomson’s decision to create naturalistic theatre.
- ‘People don’t want to have their shortcomings shoved in their face.’  
– Katherine Thomson

Discuss the way Thomson uses theatre to highlight our failings as a society and as individuals.

- Were you surprised to learn that Thomson writes the first draft of a play by hand? Debate the merits of pen and paper versus word processing.
- Have you ever experienced writer’s block? Thomson claims that overcoming writer’s block is a matter of remaining patient and letting the right story find you. Do you agree? Share your solutions to writer’s block with others in the class.
- When you start a play you want to start at a position of balance but where everything’s about to change.’  
– Katherine Thomson

Examine the opening scenes of Thomson’s plays to test the validity of this claim.

- ‘We’re always writing about ourselves.’

‘The autobiographical elements are often contained in what the



character wants and what the character needs.’  
– Katherine Thomson

Thomson makes these claims of her own writing. Do such statements ring true for you?

- ‘In theatre it’s the language that carries the drama.’  
– Katherine Thomson

Thomson’s plays are characterized by the exchange of conversation. Dialogue is more important than great speeches. Part of Thomson’s research is to record conversations with people whose stories are connected to the stories she wants to tell. The transcriptions of these conversations help her shape characters’ dialogue.

Select a Thomson character that you know well. Develop an analysis of what they say and how they speak. What do you notice? Now examine an exchange between this character and another character from the play. What do you notice?

- ‘They’re the person I start the conversation with.’  
– Katherine Thomson

What insights does Thomson provide about the role of her dramaturges?

- Were you interested to learn about Thomson’s commitment to research?
- ‘The rehearsal’s to see where the cracks are.’  
– Katherine Thomson

What is Thomson’s view of the rehearsal process?

- Were you surprised by Thomson’s

attitude to the audiences who view her plays?

- Thomson offers her best writing tips in *What I Wrote: Katherine Thomson*. What tip do you think you will follow?

- '... we have our own stories and mustn't take them for granted.'  
– Katherine Thomson

'We have to be really vigilant about Australian stories being on stage and screen.'

– Katherine Thomson

Thomson is a member of the Australian Writers' Guild (AWG). In *What I Wrote: Katherine Thomson*, Thomson explains her decision to become a member of AWG. Find out more about AWG and how it supports Australian writing and Australian writers.

- PEN is an association of writers devoted to freedom of expression in Australia and in the world at large. PEN uses its influence on behalf of writers anywhere who are silenced

by persecution, exile or imprisonment and acts as an authoritative source on all matters of free expression.

Visit PEN at <<http://www.pen.org.au>>. As a class, discuss the worth of the organization.

### Analytic responses

The following topics could be used for written text responses, debates, panel discussions and online forums.

- 'No playwright in this country does human dramas about political issues better than Thomson.' Discuss.
- 'The courage of ordinary people is at the heart of Thomson's writing.'

### From script to stage

- Create and present a short solo performance from one of Thomson's plays. Submit a short written report that describes and analyses the processes used to create and present the performance.



This program is available from **Ronin Films**.

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