



Photo: Andi Crown Photography

Mr Red Light

2020 TEACHERS RESOURCE

**New Zealand
Festival** OF THE ARTS

Curriculum Links

Drama, Visual Art, English

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THE CREATIVE TEAM

Nightsong (Aotearoa/New Zealand)

Written by **Carl Bland**

Directed by **Ben Crowder & Carl Bland**

Designed by **Andrew Foster, Elizabeth Whiting, Nik Janiurek, Charley Draper & John Gibson**

Commissioned by **The New Zealand Festival of the Arts**

Developed with the support of **Auckland Live**

“We deliver unique and innovative New Zealand works with high production values. Our works mix rich poetic language with music, visual arts, puppetry, illusion and choreographed movement. Theatre is the perfect space to incorporate all art forms. We are risk-takers! Our work pushes boundaries. We want to excite and surprise audiences to what is possible theatrically. We possess a deep love and passion for the theatre art form. We believe that theatre should be a transformative experience – audiences should go into the theatre space and come away seeing the world in a new way.... or at least seeing the possibility that the world around us is not always as it seems.” – Ben Crowder and Carl Bland

Ben Crowder and Carl Bland have been working together, on a project-to-project basis, for 10 years, and between them, they have over 50 years of experience in the New Zealand theatre landscape. In 2017 they formed their two companies into Nightsong.

CAST AND CHARACTERS

Trygve Wakenshaw | Mr Red Light

“I was drawn to the challenge of playing a character who could change so quickly, who was like a whirlwind, who was unpredictable, while trying to find a fixed point within that storm that I could anchor him to.” Read the full interview with Trygve here: nightsong.co.nz/trygve-wakenshaw

Jennifer Ludlam | Eva

“...Eva talks/spouts in ‘platitudes’ ‘truisms’ ‘old adages’. Why? Is she hiding? Feeling disconnected from the real world? She’s waiting to die but has forgotten she still has this part of ‘life’ to live.” Read the full interview with Jennifer here: nightsong.co.nz/jennifer-ludlam

Jess Sayer | Chrys

Read Jess’s full bio on the Nightsong website here: nightsong.co.nz/jess-sayer

Richard Te Are | Joker

Read Richard’s full bio on the Nightsong website here: nightsong.co.nz/richard-te-are

Simon Ferry | Trevor, An Italian Soldier, the Ant

“...the Ant, through the virtue of being outside the main action of the story, can provide insights into the larger concepts of the play.” Click through for the full interview: nightsong.co.nz/simon-ferry

ABOUT THE SHOW

It's just another day at the pie shop. Joker's behind the counter. He's waiting for his first customer. He's used to waiting. He's waiting for his own life to start. The first person through the door is Eva. She's had a long life, lost the love of her life, and in the process lost her love of life. She's waiting for the inevitable end. Finally, Chrys enters. She wants to be left alone. But there's a shadow from her past that never leaves her alone. She's waiting for that shadow to leave. Just another day at the pie shop. Three strangers alone with their pies.

Then Mr Red Light, the unluckiest man in the world, and the world's worst bank robber, bursts through the door. In a tense stand-off with the police he takes our three strangers hostage. Mr Red Light is a trickster, a fool, a prophet. As evening falls, he transforms the pie shop; into a forest, an ancient camp fire, a vast desert. He changes our hostages' lives. Suddenly the pie shop is no longer a place for lost souls, it's a place to find your soul.

Mr Red Light premiered at Auckland Live in 2019 and subsequently toured regionally. The production was shortlisted for the Adam New Zealand Play Awards 2019, and writer Carl Bland was the recipient of Grimshaw Sargeson Fellowship in 2018.

FROM THE DIRECTORS

"I've always loved those stories that feature a stranger who comes to town. This stranger doesn't know the rules, doesn't know who's important, and who to ignore. The stranger has nothing to gain because they're always about to leave. With this freedom of thought they succeed in changing everybody's lives. They often appear to be fools or mad prophets. But a closer definition would be that they are beacons of truths." Carl Bland

"I was interested in using a banal and boring place that I could turn into a space where amazing things happen." Carl Bland

When writing the script Carl Bland was inspired by painters Edward Hopper and Rene Margritte and the Surrealist and Dadaist art movements. Like the surrealists, Carl Bland is seeking to release the creative potential of the imagination, using juxtaposition and the uncanny. Characters are placed in a familiar environment, one we would recognise, but is populated with strange characters and extraordinary events. These characters and events have symbolic meanings that help the audience develop an understanding of the themes, symbols and motifs. This style of artmaking is sometimes called 'Magical Realism'. This style is brought through the entire production from the text to lighting design, costume and of course the set.

"Working on the play has really brought the theme of human connection to the fore for me. I do believe in all times, but potentially even more so today, that it is great to be reminded how sometimes the small human gesture or moment can carry enormous resonance." Ben Crowder

GENRE

Nightsong's productions can often be described as falling under the genre of 'Magic Realism'. This term typically refers to the coexistence of the real and fantastical, the natural and the supernatural, the normal and magical worlds. In Magical Realism, elements of fantasy are not questioned, non-human characters, timelessness, a sense of mystery, extraordinary events unable to be explained by rational thought, moments where the unreal becomes real. Importantly, in Magical Realism the strange and supernatural exist in a realistic setting and are accepted by other characters as normal. They coexist in a realistic world that would ordinarily make them irreconcilable.

PRODUCTION AND TECHNIQUES

LIGHTING

Lighting is used throughout the production to create a subtle nuance of ever changing mood and ambience. The bright lighting of a fast food joint, gives way to dramatic lighting changes to create vignettes for strange characters to appear seemingly out of nowhere. Lights dimming to create a campfire, the pool of light for the Ant's monologue and the romantic candlelit dinner.

"How do we light the stage inside the shop evenly while minimising any ugly shadows from the framework of the shop windows? In what sort of lighting would an ant reveal his life story? How do we help sell the location of a walnut forest or a fireplace while still looking at the pie shop interior? How does the lighting support and mimic the mood on stage? Do we use lighting to portray the passage of time as we head later into the day?" Nik Janiurek

These are some of the practical and stylistic questions lighting designer Nik Janiurek asked himself at the beginning of the production. How were these questions resolved? Would you approach the lighting design in the same way?

MOVEMENT

"One of the things with all our works is that we are very interested in shapes and sizes and contrasts so even though Trygve is very tall, we are getting him to stand on very tall things at various points when someone else is on the ground. The set is over 4m high and that's kind of a choice; we want to play with that space." [Ben Crowder speaking with the New Zealand Herald](#)

Each of the actors embody their characters through sets of physical movements that have been developed through the rehearsal process. Click through to read more about the actors development process in full on the Nightsong website, [Tygve uses mime, physical comedy and cheeky idiocy to create the character Mr Red Light](#), Jennifer Ludlam [scrutinises the script for clues to the character movements](#), while Simon Ferry [asks his characters questions to dive into their minds and movements](#).

SOUND DESIGN

"Music has the most powerful and intimate ability to make the mundane magical. At the same time you have to slip these effects under the rug of naturalism, so contrast and the wildly surreal lie hand-in-hand to make a

texture that is pretty much how everyone thinks but doesn't admit to." John Gibson, Sound Design

The sound design is used to reflect the poetry of the banal and the suburban. Song effects and song choices are used to create strange moments e.g. the crunching of the stones beneath Mr Red Light's feet that becomes the Italian, and almost too perfectly timed Jukebox songs starting up, *Psycho Killer* by the Clash and Nina Simone's *Don't let me be misunderstood*.

SET

"We were interested in creating an environment that captured the anonymous character of a shopping mall or modern franchise. Somewhere that could be anywhere and nowhere at the same time. In early discussions with Carl and Ben, we recognised a desire to create a setting that was realistic and immersive, yet strange and dreamlike." Andrew Foster

"As a maxim we tend to always work on set in rehearsal so that it can become part of our storytelling rather than something that we place a story on." Ben Crewson

The set is an important part of this production and reflects the concept of Magical Realism that is so important. Inspiration for the set design was taken from artists Edward Hopper and Gregory Crewdson. The set is film-like giving the audience the perspective that they are looking through the windows of Joker's Pie shop, watching the drama unfold. In this way the voyeuristic nature of the audience is heightened.

MOTIFS IN THE TEXT

Stories: At the very beginning of the play Eva says "All fiction is a fight against the absurd" the first of many references to stories and narrative. The Jester, Mr Red Light and Eva, all steal each other's stories and identities. Characters spiral off into telling their own stories in the middle of the plot (e.g. The Ant's monologue, Mr Red Light and the Italian).

Unluckiness: It's all in the title. Mr Red Light is always out of luck, not getting the Sir Loin pie, failing at holding up the BNZ "I don't understand why it's turned out like it has. I don't understand why nothing goes my way. I don't understand why I'm in a pie shop with a gun in my hand." – Mr Red Light.

I'm a bit of a Mr Red Light character, it's kind of my nickname at home. Because I have naturally bad luck. I do hit every red light. I can never find a parking space. It's a running gag." Carl Bland

Surreal characters: Strange characters keep appearing in vignettes throughout the performance. The Italian, the Ant, the Skeleton and the Shadow... for the characters these apparitions aren't unusual. These characters burst into the scene, with no apparent connection to the narrative and take a moment to help the audience understand the themes and symbols throughout the play.

FURTHER RESOURCES AND READINGS

INTERVIEW:

"...our pie shop is quite a bland, unremarkable pie shop, filled with what at first seems like some unremarkable people. But of course, that all changes as the evening goes on. There's a lot of magic going on."

Meet Carl Bland and Ben Crowder and read an interview about creating *Mr Red Light*.
nightsong.co.nz/the-creators

WATCH:

Watch the *Mr Red Light* trailer: youtu.be/QY0J_E2kkIE

LISTEN:

To an interview with Carl Bland talking about his play *Spirit House*:
rnz.co.nz/national/programmes/saturday/audio/201832849/carl-bland-veteran-of-alternative-theatre

GO FURTHER:

Take a look at Nightsong's previous productions: nightsong.co.nz

Explore the genre of Magical Realism in theatre with these three plays

Angels in America by Tony Kushner: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Angels_in_America

Marisol by José Rivera: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marisol_\(play\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marisol_(play))

The Clean House by Sarah Ruhl: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Clean_House

Investigate the work of three artists that inspired Carl Bland when he was writing and directing *Mr Red Light*.

Gregory Crewdson: <https://gagosian.com/artists/gregory-crewdson/>

Edward Hopper: <https://www.wikiart.org/en/edward-hopper>

Rene Margritte: <https://www.moma.org/artists/3692>

"With nods to Kiwi culture and its inquiry into our identity, live theatre goers should not miss this one" **NZ ENTERTAINMENT PODCAST**

"Surreal, beautiful, hysterical and outrageously original" **NZ HERALD**

"A winning combination of down-to-earth heart-warming comedy and sage words of wisdom" **THEATRE SCENES**

PROVOCATIONS AND ACTIVITIES

PRE-FESTIVAL

Take a look at the website of production company [Nightsong](#). Explore their previous work [Te Pō Spirit House](#) and [360 – A Theatre of Recollections](#). What do you notice about the different productions? How does this effect your expectations of the performance?

Discuss the genre Magic Realism (a brief description is in the preceding pages). Can you think of any plays, movies artworks or literature that could fit in this genre?

AT THE FESTIVAL

What sense of energy do you feel in the theatre space? What do you notice about the set, lighting and sound before the performance has even begun?

What captures your attention during the play? The actors? The set? The music? Why?

What questions do you have about the production? What is the meaning of the play?

AFTER THE FESTIVAL

What was your overall reaction to *Mr Red Light*? Did you find the production compelling?

What was the most interesting character or theme in the play? Why?

How did the actors use drama techniques (voice, body movement and space) to create their characters?

How was lighting, costume, set design and sound used to support the central ideas of the play?

How do the characters evolve or stay the same? What drama techniques do the actors use to communicate this change?

What were the main themes and ideas evident in the script? Find specific examples in the script to back this up.

How was the structure of the play different from a normal linear narrative and why was this important? How did this affect you as an audience member?

Extraordinary events occur throughout *Mr Red Light*. Some are depicted as scenes within the performance and some are spoken about by the characters (for example the appearance of the Italian, the death of the Ant, the armed defenders squad happening to be at the bank).

Discuss the writer's purpose for including these scenes. Think about how they were realised on stage by the director and the design team and discuss what effect they had on you as an audience member.