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# Past the Shallows

Education Resource

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ATYP would like to acknowledge that we are a company that works and creates on the traditional lands and waters of the Gadigal people, and we are grateful to be telling stories on First Nations Country that has such a rich history of storytelling.

We pay our respects to Elders past and present.

## Synopsis

Harry and Miles live with their father, an abalone diver, on the wild and beautiful south coast of Tasmania. With their father largely absent, they look after each other as best they can. Over a school holiday while Miles works on the boat, Harry begins an unlikely friendship that will upset the delicate balance holding this unpredictable world together.

Adapted by playwright Julian Larnach from Favel Parrett's award-winning debut novel, *Past the Shallows* is an ode to brotherhood and a heart-wrenching, lyrical exploration of mortality, family secrets and the capacity for both brutality and tenderness within contemporary masculinity.

Acclaimed director Ben Winspear directs a powerhouse cast of three young actors playing multiple roles in this brand new stage adaptation. Let yourself be swept away on the tide of this compelling and deeply poignant story that will stay with you long after the lights come up.



# Cast & Creatives

A co-production between ATYP and Archipelago Productions

**Favel Parrett**

Author

**Julian Larnach**

Writer

**Ben Winspear**

Director & Dramaturg

**Keerthi Subramanyam**

Set & Costume Designer

**Glenn Richards**

Sound Designer

**Jason James**

Lighting Designer

**Nema Adel**

AV Designer

**Taryn Brown**

Production Manager

**Hannah Crane**

Stage Manager

**With**

Meg Clarke

Ryan Hodson

Griffin McLaughlin

**Warnings**

Explicit language, themes of alcoholism, and family violence

According to the NSW government, 1 in 4 children are exposed to domestic violence. [1800respect.org.au](https://www.1800respect.org.au) says that recovery can be aided in part by victims being kept safe from violence and from reminders of previous trauma – known as ‘trauma triggers’.

For information, support and counselling contact 1800RESPECT on 1800 737 732 or visit the [1800RESPECT website](https://www.1800respect.org.au).

# Meet the Director

This production owes its entire existence to Favel, whose inspiration it was and who gifted us the rights to the adaptation in a gesture of absolute trust.

Favel writes with elegance, simplicity, and truth, and conjures uncompromisingly poetic landscapes, devoid of sentimentality. The indifferent power and beauty of the ocean is as strong a character in her novel as her humans, who themselves inspire us with their resilience, endurance, and suffering.

Working with Julian on this process has taught me an enormous amount. Not just about ways of approaching adaptation, but also how theatre can respond to literature to create something new, neither a completely faithful representation of the book [an impossibility] nor a conventional play.

It's a little like making a child, one that retains its parent's DNA, but also comes into the world with its own will and ideas about who it wants to be. Our first task was to listen closely to the words and images in the novel from which we began to select knowing that we would need to be ruthless with who and what we left behind.

In adapting, you have to come to terms with willingly doing damage to a beautiful thing. Knowing that from the wreckage a reconstruction of sorts will soon begin. From this initial stripping down we used, wherever possible, Favel's words to rebuild the work for the stage. With a reduced cast of characters, trying to tell the complete story with only a fraction of the material while retaining as much of the style and emotion of the original as possible.

Sometimes co-productions happen for the best of reasons; a shared love of the text and a desire to see it reach an audience. ATYP has been the most enthusiastic of supporters; creative and caring, taking the majority of the difficult and thankless tasks, to allow me the freedom to concentrate on building the work. This involvement has also allowed us to bring artists from NSW to lutruwita/Tasmania and has given artists from our island the chance to take their work to Sydney. For some, it will be their first time working interstate. Thanks are also due to Salamanca Arts Centre for its early support, giving us space to write and, finally, a home for the work.

The cast has been inspiring and trusting, bursting with love for the characters and willing to explore completely new ways of telling stories on stage. They have not been given roles, which takes courage to accept. But between us, we have discovered three personal logics to drive three shared, but unique, visions of the story. They have poured so much of themselves into the production that it is impossible to imagine it having been made by anyone else. It is built from their intelligence and joy.

Lastly, I would like to thank Marta, who has encouraged, inspired, and occasionally pushed me along on this journey. We hope to have done Favel proud.

Ben Winspear

# Set & Costume Design

## Set Design

The idea for the set design for *Past the Shallows* is to be as abstract as possible. It should feel like we are really in the book. Because a lot of the script is narration, the intention is for it to feel like memories being transformed into the space.

The set consists of three walls and a floor. It is an abstract design which means it does not show the setting of the play in a literal way, instead it strives to evoke an emotion or an idea from the story. Practicality is a big part of set design. It must be creative and serve the story, but still be functional so the actors can perform on it.

As well as physical structures, there is an audio visual aspect to the set design. With the help of projection, the walls resemble the water, and the floor resembles a darker water, with levels and platforms to play with. Once the walls are met with projections, it gives the audience a real sense of water, or being near water, or being underwater.

The texture of the floor and the walls is important, because it shouldn't look like a screen just waiting for projection when there is no projection on it. When the floor and walls are bare, they must still have character and life and feel elemental, like water or rock, or a part of the landscape.

There is also a door at the back, which helps to transform this abstract space into something a little more domestic, while also functioning as an entrance and exit for the actors.

## Costume Design

Because the actors are sharing all the characters, they will need to transform quite quickly. As a result, it is necessary for the costume design to be relatively basic. It should feel of the world, but be able to transform between characters. The designs lean into natural fibres and materials. It's important that the costumes don't look expensive as they must accurately reflect the world of the play.

It's important to remember that the dominant temperature of the play is cold. So while shorts give a youthfulness to the characters, we must remember that these characters are freezing most of the time. Any talk of heat or sunshine is merely a memory.

The costume design for *Past the Shallows* evolved throughout the rehearsal process as the designer learnt more about the characters and the choices that the actors make while playing each character.

# Interview with Playwright Julian Larnach

## 1. Can you please describe the process of adapting a novel for the stage?

Adaptation is really fun, and I highly recommend it as an exercise for anyone wanting to look under the hood of a text and really break apart why it's so successful. I am a playwright by trade so I work on my own material – characters and worlds entirely imagined. But with adaptation it's a whole new challenge: it's less about creation and more about choices. Early on in the process, the director Ben and I made some pretty big choices through which we would filter the book:

- i. There would be three actors. There are three brothers at the centre of the story and three is the most dramatic number so we would be forced to find uniquely theatrical ways to solve problems when, say, there are five characters in a scene.
- ii. The middle brother Miles is the most “active” in the story, by that I mean he has to make the most decisions. Drama is about watching people make choices so we decided to centre the theatrical work on Miles for that reason.
- iii. We needed to start as late into the novel as possible. Young people are super story-smart so they can read the beats of a story before you've laid it out for them, so we wanted to drop the audience way into the story and have them start figuring it out.

Making big, brazen choices early allowed us to dive in quicker and deeper into what our theatrical version of this would be and allow us to leave the book behind.

## 2. Is there a theme within the work that especially resonated with you? Why?

The book does an amazing job of interrogating the notion of vulnerability. How it affects a community, how it affects a family, how it affects an individual. After the death of their mother, all three sons deal with this

hurt in a different way: older brother Joe [in our version Tom because too many similar names] runs away, Miles is starting to harden to it and Harry was too young to remember so focuses on the good memories of this mother. In a lot of ways Miles is given a choice: calcify and run away from hurt or embrace vulnerability and the good things that come through it like new family, connection, and love.

## 3. What do you think the story tells us about family?

Favel has a deep respect and awe for the natural world and I think her treatment for what a family is comes out of that. Family is a living organism. It functions as a unit, it thrives or shrivels based on its components. The loss of the mother creates a vacuum of care within this unit and though it is periodically patched up by an aunt dropping off groceries or George [Burnt Bill in our version] letting Harry play with his dog – ultimately the dad's inability to engage in a nurturing manner dooms this family.

That's not to say that new families can't be found or formed, but old ones need to be dismantled first. It's why I don't see the end of the play [or the book] as the story of this family ending but rather a reset point and a new family being made.

## 4. What does this story teach us about “The Human Experience”?

I think the book is really clever in using multiple points of view as a way of accessing a broader range of the human experience. It's not a blockbuster where there's endless plot and exposition to get through, not a lot of “stuff” happens, so I think what the multiple point of views help the reader/listener/viewer explore is how little we know about what's going on outside of our own experience of the world. Characters are quite mean to each other in this story but it's never from a point of malice, but rather ignorance – of not knowing how they're hurting the others around them. This works really well in a novel

because you can take in this information at your own speed, but because you only experience a play once and in sequence, that effect is harder to get in drama. So to get at the same idea of “not knowing”, we reduced the world to Miles’ perspective but knew the rest of the story unfolding around him, so there’s a lot more room for hints, hearing about things or feeling something is off.

### **5. How important is the sense of place or setting in this story?**

Place is incredibly important in this story. It provides the environment for the action, a lexicon for the characters and, pardon the pun, a genuine undercurrent for the characters’ histories and expectations for their futures. When reading Favel’s words, you feel like you’ve known this world forever – so much so that when I visited the south coast of Tasmania early in the process I felt like I’d been there already. Coming from north-west NSW I couldn’t understand the unique nature of Tasmanian isolation. For me, isolation is about distance so I couldn’t understand how being an hour and a half out of Hobart would present such a barrier for the characters. Going there and seeing the winter sun set, a cold and complete darkness settled on the landscape and I suddenly understood why Miles felt like he had no way out. But even this alien world felt familiar and that’s a credit to Favel’s amazing writing.

### **6. In your play, how do you use language and literary devices, including symbolism, to create a sense of culture and place?**

Symbols are the nuclear weapon of writing. Sitting there inert, with a thousand different connotations, waiting to be deployed to messy and complicated effect. The three symbols that struck me in the book and I couldn’t wait to put on stage were:

1] The Mako shark that jumps out of the ocean and onto the abalone boat early in the story. The shark represents danger, but it’s also out of its element. So you track it from being dangerous, to being confused, to when Jeff cuts it open and the pups are drowning in their mothers

blood – oof. This is arguably the whole story in a single image or symbol. Put that in a painting and you have Past the Shallows as a single image. The joy of doing that in theatre and not in a book is that the audience can’t linger on it. We just drop it in and move on from it and then the audience lets that accumulate. The arithmetic of the play then becomes about adding up all of those things. Miles sees this and realises that ‘the young one’ is the one that needs help to last or to get out. This symbol is of course then carried through into the shark tooth on the necklace.

2] When Miles and Harry are being driven to the boat late in the story and they pass a truck with a bull caught on its front. The rage, velocity, and the unexpected, wrapped up in a messy moment never explained, really explains the inner lives of the kids in their current situation.

3] The abalone that the characters hunt throughout the book is packed with symbolism. It’s potential and treasure and access put dangerously and increasingly out of the way of the characters by nature and circumstance. By the end of the story, they are going further and deeper and at greater personal risk to themselves – all in pursuit of this impossible goal that will fix all their problems. The dad’s reward is wealth, but for the kids, it’s about escape.

A lot of the reviews of the novel compare it to Ernest Hemmingway with its sparse language – not a word is wasted, and it is important how those words sound. It’s the alliteration and the assonance and the rhythm of the way that people speak. I think other books have done it badly, the idea that working class people, or impoverished people have a ‘poetic’ nature to what they’re talking about, but I think the very specific words that they use allow you to imagine their world and allow you to sink into what I think is a brutality to living on an island off the continent. Favel is beautiful with dialogue and as a playwright I adore that. There is so much said when someone chooses not to talk. There is juxtaposition, or contrast, when having a character describe something beautiful, but it’s still within something awful that’s



happening. As an audience, we have a choice to indulge in the language, which is beautiful, or look at what is being described which is awful. The language choices help to show the 'un-naturalness' of their existence – they're actually swimming upstream against this beautiful landscape. Amongst this abundant world, the characters are choosing to pursue something scarce and I think that hopefully captures a dying moment in humanity by saying, "let's avoid that." It's actually what we can share that is important.

### **7. How does *Past the Shallows* give us an insight into the inconsistencies and paradoxes of human behaviour and motivations?**

I think something that the book does exceptionally well is that it looks at perspectives, or points of view. It has different chapters from different characters' points of view. But it doesn't have a blockbuster's worth of plot or exposition that needs to be made clear because, actually, not much happens. Adaptation is an act of excavation and it makes you think "why do we need to see 'nothing' from a whole lot of perspectives?". I think it's something to do with the idea that being human is a lot about the pursuit of knowing, but also not knowing. So through all these characters, you get the idea that nobody knows what is happening in someone else's life. That's why I think it's really beautiful in those scenes where you're introduced to a character's day before they meet someone, and it's the crossover of events where you get all that information together that is really beautiful.

And so it is communication and connection that starts to resolve all these issues. If everyone talks at the beginning of this play and sets out everything they know, a lot of the bad stuff doesn't happen. That's very Greek, that's very Roman, that's very Shakespearean. People really do have to just talk, and it's the inability of these people to talk which leads to its ending. It's a Shakespearean idea of these characters being in the wrong play. They might be fine in another play, and I think that's the beauty of it. If Othello was in Hamlet, he'd be fine. If Hamlet was in Othello, he would know Iago was making everything up.

To get to the crux of an issue in *Past the Shallows*, what works is to have all these different perspectives. But to get to that same crux of an issue in a theatrical way, it is about anchoring it in one perspective. Information disparity is what creates tension, so by zooming in on Miles in the play, the audience gets a more personal experience of that world and you feel the other perspectives through him. You look at Jasper Jones, or Huckleberry Finn, these seminal childrens' tales are fine when you're an adult and you have a lot more information. As a child, everything is terrifying and everything is coming at you for the very first time, so it is interesting for us to tell stories like these from that particular perspective.



[Link to interview](#) with the Writer Julian Larnach

# ATYP Education

ATYP's Education team creates experiences that connect schools across Australia to our theatre company. Our programs give students unique insights into the theatre-making process; through participating in an ATYP student workshop or seeing an ATYP production [either in person or online].

ATYP offers:

**Student Workshops** — a practical drama experience to build skills with your students to meet curriculum needs or bespoke performance goals.

**Theatre Flat-Pack** — the support needed to stage your own ATYP production at your school.

**Intersection Festival** — students rehearse and perform in The Rebel Theatre, with short plays by Australia's leading young adult playwrights which are then published.

**ATYP On Demand** — ATYP's digital classroom offers a library of ATYP's past productions [filmed in HD] accompanied by resources that take you deeper into the world of each play.

**ATYP On Demand Plus** — a unique digital education program for primary schools that uses drama and literacy strategies to teach curriculum areas and concepts in the F-6 Australian Curriculum.

Contact ATYP Education for more details on any of our programs at [education@atyp.com.au](mailto:education@atyp.com.au) or 9270 2400.

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