



AN ENSEMBLE THEATRE EDUCATION RESOURCE

DAVID WILLIAMSON'S

TOP SILK

DIRECTED BY MARK KILMURRY



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ICON LEGEND



**Discussion
Activity**



Reflection

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

Ensemble Theatre proudly acknowledges the Cammeraygal people of the Eora nation as customary custodians of the land on which we stand and share our stories.

In harmony with the rhythms of land and sea, the Cammeraygal people nurtured their culture and traditions through countless generations, and the connection continues to this day.

We pay our respects to Elders past and present.

PREFACE

This education resource for Ensemble Theatre's production of David Williamson's TOP SILK, has been designed for secondary students and teachers across Australia. Exercises have been designed that encompass theoretical and practical components and can be applied to different stages of learning at the discretion of the teacher, class, and context.

This resource pack was created by Ensemble Education Lead, Sophie Kelly.

CURRICULUM LINKS

For NSW based students, David Williamson's TOP SILK and its accompanying resources have links to the following syllabus outcomes within the NESA Curriculum:

DRAMA

STAGE 6

YEAR 12 DRAMATIC TRADITIONS IN AUSTRALIA

Making: H1.3

Performing: H2.2, H2.4, H2.5

Critically Studying: H3.1, H3.3, H3.4, H3.5

YEAR 11 THEATRICAL TRADITIONS AND PERFORMANCE STYLES (REALISM)

Making: P1.3, P1.4, P1.6

Performing: P2.4, P2.6

Critically Studying: P3.1, P3.2, P3.3

STAGE 5

COMPULSORY STUDY OF THEATRICAL FORM/STYLE (REALISM)

Making: 5.1.1, 5.1.3, 5.1.4

Performing: 5.2.2, 5.2.3

Appreciating: 5.3.1, 5.3.2, 5.3.3

Note: Stage 6 Australian Drama and Theatre (Core Study) lists THE REMOVALISTS by David Williamson as a proposed playscript for study. TOP SILK could be an accompanying study to THE REMOVALISTS.

ENGLISH

STAGE 6

YEAR 12 TEXTS AND HUMAN EXPERIENCES

EST-12-01

EST-12-02

EST-12-03

YEAR 11

EST-11-01

EST-11-02

EST-11-03

STAGE 5

STUDY OF DRAMATIC TEXTS

EN5-RVL-01

EN5-URA-01

EN5-URB-01

EN5-URC-01

STAGE 4

STUDY OF DRAMATIC TEXTS

EN4-RVL-01

EN4-URA-01

EN4-URB-01

EN4-URC-01

KEY THEMES AND IDEAS

- Justice vs ambition
- Morality and the legal profession
- Power, class and privilege
- Gender and authority
- Truth vs performance
- Personal vs professional life

TOP SILK: A SHORT HISTORY

1989 — THE PREMIERE

David Williamson's TOP SILK premiered at Sydney's Seymour Centre on 11 January 1989, directed by Rodney Fisher. The original cast included Tina Bursill, Geoff Morrell, Helmut Bakaitis, John Howard, John Clayton, Simon Kay, Barbara Lowing, Vince Martin and Leo Wockner. The play took audiences into the world of lawyers, courts, family and ambition, exploring power, money, morality and the price of success.

1989 — A HIT, BUT NOT WITH EVERYONE

The play toured to Melbourne, Canberra and Adelaide. Melbourne audiences embraced it, and publicity proclaimed it a "hit". In Sydney, however, the response from some critics was much cooler. Celebrated Sydney Morning Herald critic H.G. Kippax called it "dutiful but disappointing", arguing that Williamson tried to tackle too many issues without giving his characters enough time to develop.

1990–91 — NEW PRODUCTIONS

The play continued to be produced around Australia, including a Queensland Theatre Company production in 1990 and a Perth production in 1991. Its themes of power, professional ambition, relationships and the justice system continued to resonate with audiences.

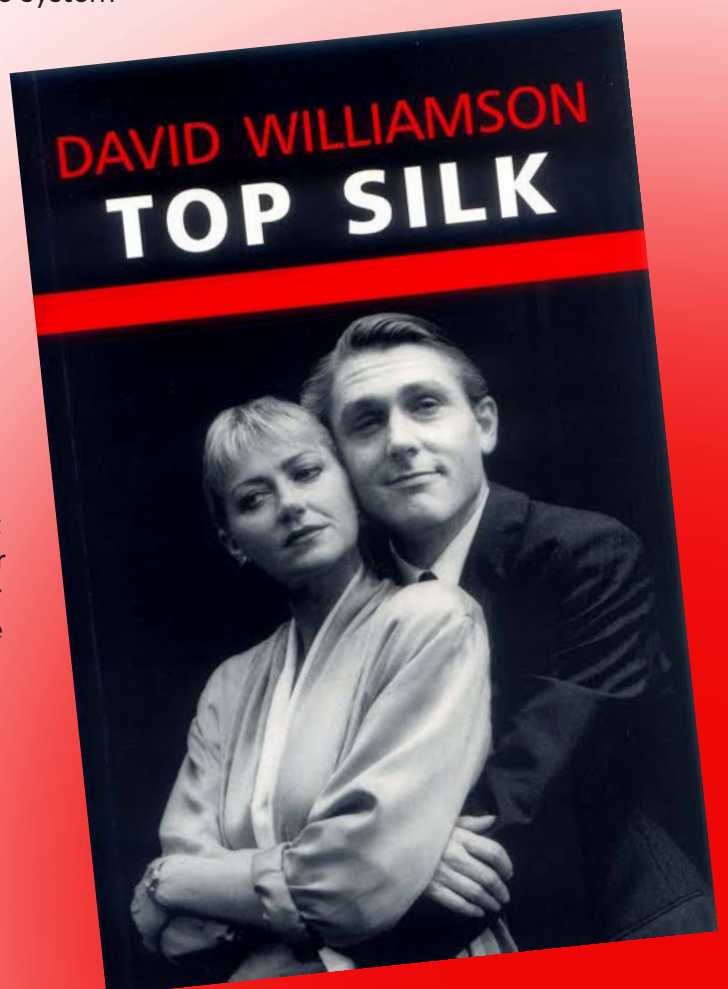
2026 — ENSEMBLE THEATRE, SYDNEY

Now, 37 years after its premiere, TOP SILK returns to Sydney at Ensemble Theatre, directed by Mark Kilmurry and again explores the tumultuous personal and professional cost of the collision between ambition, family loyalty and professional success.

DOES TOP SILK STILL FEEL RELEVANT?

The world of 1989 has changed dramatically—but have the people in it? Australia still debates power and privilege, workplace ambition, wealth, gender and family expectations, the fairness of the justice system, and what success costs us.

Perhaps the most interesting question for today's audience is whether we have changed at all?



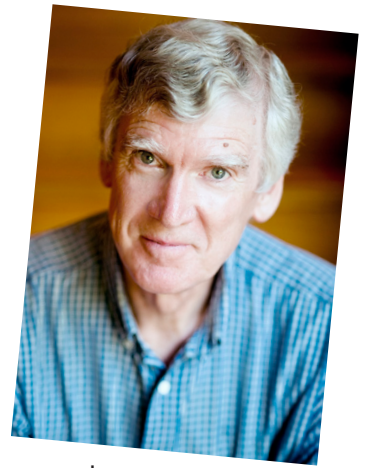
PLAYWRIGHT'S BIOGRAPHY: DAVID WILLIAMSON

David Williamson AO is one of Australia's best-known and most influential playwrights. Born in Melbourne in 1942, he originally studied mechanical engineering and later taught at university before turning to theatre.

His first full-length play, *THE COMING OF THE STORK* was performed in Melbourne in 1970. Plays including *THE REMOVALISTS*, *DON'S PARTY*, *THE CLUB*, *TRAVELLING NORTH* and *BRILLIANT LIES* established Williamson as a major voice in Australian theatre. His work is known for its sharp humour, lively arguments and characters who find themselves caught between personal desires and wider social pressures.

Williamson has also written extensively for film and television, including the screenplays for *GALLIPOLI*, *THE YEAR OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY* and *PHAR LAP*. He has received numerous Australian Writers' Guild and Australian Film Institute awards and was appointed an Officer of the Order of Australia.

For more than 50 years, Williamson has used theatre to hold up a mirror to Australian society—exploring politics, class, money, relationships, family, power and the ways Australians see themselves. *TOP SILK* first performed in 1989, is part of that remarkable body of work.



PLAYWRIGHT'S NOTE:

It's an exciting but anxious thing to face again a work from one's past. Exciting to see again where one's creative passions lay, and anxious in hoping they still resonate with audiences. If Mark has chosen to do it again, my fears that it may not still resonate are greatly lessened. His judgement has always proved right in our long creative relationship. I am also strong in my conviction that whatever the surface changes our society has undergone that our core human nature changes little.

This play is about marriage and family on the one level. About how blind ambition and lack of emotional connection can rip a family apart. On the other level it's a comment on the law. How it can sometimes be over severe on the powerless and over lenient on the powerful and I don't think that's changed.

And it's about the human capacity for compassion of which Jane Frederick's has perhaps too much for her own good and Trevor Frederick's has too little for his.

On its first outing, coming straight after my big comedy hit *EMERALD CITY*, some critics complained there weren't enough laughs. There weren't meant to be. This was written as a searching look at marriage and the Law. Other critics said it was my best work yet. I'll leave you to judge.

DAVID WILLIAMSON AO



TOP SILK rehearsal photos - Prudence Upton

TOP SILK: SYNOPSIS

Jane Fredericks is a passionate legal aid solicitor who believes strongly in justice and in helping people who cannot afford a powerful lawyer. Her husband, Trevor, is a successful barrister whose career has taken him to the top of the legal profession. Their teenage son, Mark, is caught between his parents and their very different ideas about right and wrong.

When Jane becomes involved in defending an old flame accused of a serious crime, the case begins to blur the boundaries between her professional responsibilities and her personal life. At the same time, Trevor is offered the chance to defend a wealthy and influential media businessman. The case could take his career to another level—but it also forces him to confront difficult questions about loyalty, ambition and professional ethics.

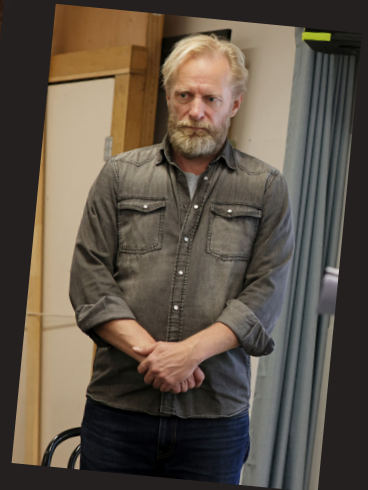
As the courtroom battles unfold, tensions within the Fredericks family intensify. Williamson uses sharp humour, arguments and family conflict to explore the complicated relationship between justice and power. Is the law always fair? Can success come at a cost? And what happens when doing the “right” thing conflicts with protecting the people we love?

DIRECTOR'S NOTES: MARK KILMURRY

The marvellous thing about TOP SILK, a play written in 1989, is how relevant it still is; family dynamics, drug-related sentences and corruption in high places. The landscape and tone may have shifted from the late 80s to the present day, but socially, we still tackle similar themes. David Williamson's play also touches on the education system, the misuse of politics and a justice system that avoids the grey areas of human cost.

TOP SILK is a favourite play of mine I have wanted to direct for some time, and so I'm delighted we have such a wonderful cast and creative team to tell a great story by our master storyteller. Enjoy.

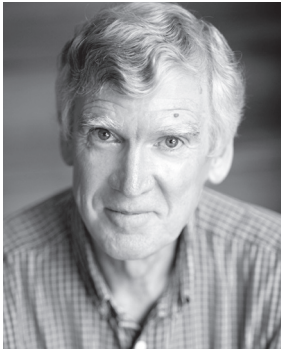
MARK KILMURRY



TOP SILK rehearsal photos - Prudence Upton

MEET THE TEAM

CREATIVES



DAVID WILLIAMSON
PLAYWRIGHT



MARK KILMURRY
DIRECTOR



JESSICA FALLICO
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR



AILSA PATERSON
SET & COSTUME DESIGNER



KELSEY LEE
LIGHTING DESIGNER



MADELEINE PICARD
COMPOSER &
SOUND DESIGNER



LAUREN TULLOH
STAGE MANAGER



YASMIN BREEZE
ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER



MONICA SMITH
COSTUME SUPERVISOR

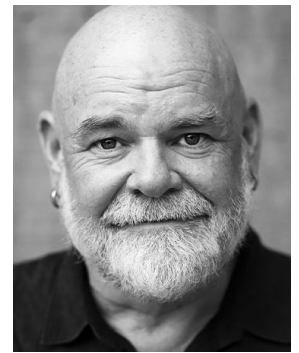
CAST



NICOLAS BROWN
TREVOR FREDERICKS



THOMAS CAMPBELL
PAUL BRADLEY/THE
JUDGE



LAURENCE COY
STUART KELVIN/THE
PROSECUTOR



RACHEL GORDON
JANE FREDERICKS



SAMIR NASSER
MARK FREDERICKS



JAMIE OXENBOULD
TONY TURNER/
COURTROOM
STENOGRAPHER



JEREMY WATERS
EDDIE O'DONNELL

JESSICA FALLICO VOICE OF TRISH O'DONNELL

Q&A WITH ACTOR – THOMAS CAMPBELL

ONE OF THE CHARACTERS YOU PLAY, PAUL BRADLEY, IS AN ETHICALLY BANKRUPT MEDIA MOGUL WHO CREATES A CHALLENGING MORAL DILEMMA FOR TREVOR FREDERICKS. IS PLAYING A CHARACTER WITH THIS LEVEL OF MORAL AMBIGUITY FUN OR DAUNTING? OR A LITTLE BIT OF BOTH?

A character like Paul Bradley requires you to delve into his motivations and find the reasons or justifications behind his behaviour. That's always a little daunting at first, but once you've done the work, it's incredibly rewarding and great fun to play these villainous types of characters.



WHAT IS YOUR FAVOURITE PART OF WORKING IN LIVE THEATRE?

Theatre is my favourite medium as an actor because it's completely alive and exists in the moment. It's a thrilling experience from one performance to the next, as every audience responds differently, subtly changing the energy of the show each night. I also love the strong sense of community that comes from being in rehearsals and then backstage with a wonderfully motley crew of theatre folk.



CAN YOU IDENTIFY A MOMENT IN YOUR LIFE YOU DECIDED TO BE A PERFORMER?

I was in Year 2 when I was cast as the Prince in Cinderella. During one performance, I decided to improvise a silly line and got a huge laugh from the audience. That moment was enough to hook me, and I've wanted to be an actor ever since.



IF YOU WERE GOING TO GIVE YOUR HIGH SCHOOL SELF ONE PIECE OF ADVICE ABOUT PURSUING A CAREER IN THE PERFORMING ARTS, WHAT WOULD IT BE?

My advice would be to become interested in every facet of the performing arts. Put yourself in situations where you can learn about stage management, lighting, cinematography, acting, singing, design, and as many other aspects of the industry as possible. Versatility is a real strength. It's a tough industry, but if you truly love it and don't limit yourself to just one area of the performing arts, you'll build a richer, more fulfilling career with greater longevity.



TOP SILK rehearsal photos - Prudence Upton



TOP SILK production photo - Prudence Upton

Q&A WITH ACTOR – LAURENCE COY

YOU PLAY TWO DIFFERENT CHARACTERS IN TOP SILK WHO BOTH COME FROM THE LEGAL WORLD. HAVE YOU FOUND IT INTERESTING TO INVESTIGATE THE WORLD OF THE LAW AND LAWYERS?

It's been interesting to bring two contrasting lawyers to life - one corrupt, and one trying his best to win but ultimately failing. I have quite a few friends that are lawyers and they live in a fascinating world. They make deals, are well connected, constantly educate themselves, and good ones have to read widely and know what's going on in the community around them. Some of them are enormously rich too and this has all been great fun to explore.

YOU'VE WORKED WITH DIRECTOR MARK KILMURRY NUMEROUS TIMES – WHAT DO YOU ENJOY ABOUT WORKING WITH HIM?

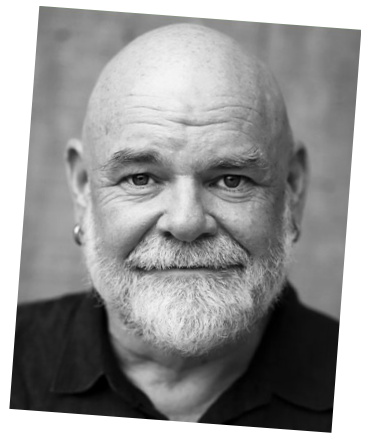
Mark is a really good director. He's always very well prepared, he knows the script he's working on in incredible detail, he knows where he wants to go... and he is possessed of highly evolved people management skills so it all seems effortless and fun.

DO YOU THINK THIS PLAY CHALLENGES ANY ASSUMPTIONS OR STEREOTYPES? IF SO, HOW?

It's easy to believe that high profile, highly educated, wealthy barristers are above the drudgery of everyday life. This play shows that they have complex personal lives just like everyone else. I also like the way the play makes us sympathise with a convicted drug dealer. It also shines a light on hideous political and media operators who are even more relevant today than when the play was written.

WAS THERE A PARTICULAR TEACHER, MENTOR OR PERFORMANCE THAT INFLUENCED YOUR CAREER?

I've been lucky enough to have a professional relationship with a director named Aarne Neeme for forty five years. He's directed me in 28 plays, inspired me with his work ethic, and has always been my mentor (without ever wanting to be). I feel blessed.



TOP SILK rehearsal photos - Prudence Upton



TOP SILK production photo - Prudence Upton

Q&A WITH COMPOSER & SOUND DESIGNER – MADELEINE PICARD

WHEN CREATING THE SOUND DESIGN FOR TOP SILK DID YOU HAVE AN IMMEDIATE SENSE OF THE 'AURAL' WORLD OF THE PLAY? OR WAS IT SOMETHING THAT DEVELOPED THROUGH RESEARCH AND/OR THE REHEARSAL PROCESS?

Mark Kilmurry knew from the start of the process that he was interested in cello as a sonic language for the play, so a lot of my early experimentation was based around that instrument. I knew from the tone of the text that the tone of the music would need to be on the darker side, as we follow these characters as their worlds start to unravel. The structure of the play meant that it was quite clear early on that the music would mainly be in transitions (rather than underscoring the scenes), so I also knew I wanted it to be able to have a consistent drive forwards to help keep the momentum of the play going.

DO YOU HAVE A SIMILAR PROCESS FOR SOUND DESIGN FOR EACH PROJECT YOU WORK ON, OR DOES IT CHANGE DEPENDING ON THE DEMANDS OF A PARTICULAR PIECE OF WORK?

I would say I have a reasonably similar process in terms of creating sound designs - the process always starts by reading the text closely and marking where sound and music might need to be used to either help with transitions or to help heighten the scenes, and then by meeting with the director and sharing references to create a shared sonic language. I always film rehearsal room runs and compose music to the videos, as this helps with getting the timings right. Then I play sound during rehearsals to try it out and make any changes before we get into technical rehearsals.

HOW DID YOU FIRST BECOME INTERESTED IN SOUND DESIGN?

I first started doing sound design during my studies at NIDA. I originally went into NIDA to train as a stage manager, but the course that I did was very generalised and gave us the opportunity to work across various different technical disciplines. I was lucky to be given the chance to sound design a production of PICNIC AT HANGING ROCK directed by Claudia Osbourne in my second year, and I fell in love with sound design as a creative discipline. I had a background in music growing up, and this definitely helped me to be able to develop as a sound designer and composer.

AND FINALLY, IF YOU HAD ANY ADVICE TO GIVE YOUNG PEOPLE INTERESTED IN MOVING INTO SOUND DESIGN AS A CAREER, WHAT WOULD IT BE?

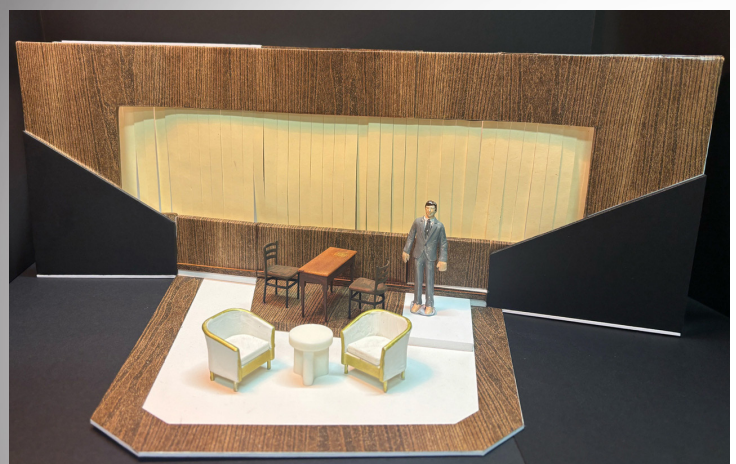
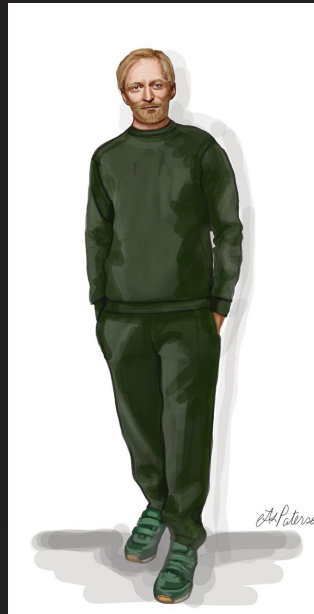
I would say to just start playing around - there is a lot of information online about different sound design and music production tips and it's definitely a job where you're always learning as you're creating. You can look into studying formally, or you can start by working in the independent sector and building up your skills and portfolio that way - both are equally valid ways of learning and developing as an artist. Make connections with other artists working in theatre - both with other sound designers and also with directors, playwrights, lighting designers, etc - one of the things I find most valuable about this job is the community of artists that I work with and the people that I get to work with across multiple projects, as you build up an ongoing artistic collaboration. Finally, see as much theatre as possible and listen carefully - there are so many amazing sound designers and composers working in Sydney theatre at the moment and they all have very different styles and approaches to how they build the sound and music for a show.



TOP SILK rehearsal photos - Prudence Upton

DESIGN IMAGES

AILSA PATERSON SET & COSTUME DESIGNER



TEACHING AND LEARNING - ACTIVITY 1

DRAMA FOCUS: THE COURTROOM - POWER AND STATUS

OVERVIEW:

TOP SILK is set within the world of the legal profession, where language, confidence and status can influence how people are perceived. This activity explores how power can be communicated through performance, even before a character speaks.

OBJECTIVES:

- To explore how actors communicate status and power physically and vocally.
- To examine the relationship between character, space and authority.
- To experiment with performance choices that influence an audience.

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Create a Courtroom: in small groups, arrange the classroom as a courtroom. Allocate roles such as barrister, solicitor, witness, judge, accused person and members of the public.

2. Establish Status: ask students to create a series of frozen images showing different levels of status. Experiment with:

- Who stands and who sits?
- Who occupies the most space?
- Who makes eye contact?
- Who is physically isolated?
- Who controls the centre of the room?

3. Add the Voice: choose one simple statement from the play, such as when the Judge in Scene 13 (pg 67) said: "There is no such plea as a reluctant plea, Mr Fredericks. It's either guilty or not guilty."

- Perform it in different ways: confidently, nervously, aggressively, quietly, sarcastically and as if the speaker has complete authority
- Discuss how the meaning changes even though the words remain identical

4. Create a Short Courtroom Scene: Groups improvise a two-minute courtroom confrontation in which one character has considerably more social or professional power than another. Encourage students to use movement, gesture, pace, silence and vocal delivery rather than relying only on dialogue.

REFLECTION PROMPT:

How can an actor make an audience believe that one character has more power than another? How might this relate to the world of TOP SILK?



TOP SILK production photos -
Prudence Upton

TEACHING AND LEARNING - ACTIVITY 2

DRAMA FOCUS: THE ETHICS OF A DIFFICULT CHOICE

OVERVIEW:

At the heart of TOP SILK are questions about justice, professional responsibility, ambition and personal loyalty. This activity asks students to explore what happens when a character is forced to choose between two competing values.

OBJECTIVES:

- To explore ethical dilemmas through improvisation.
- To develop character motivation and dramatic tension.
- To consider how different viewpoints can coexist within a scene.

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. The Dilemma: Give students this scenario: a lawyer discovers information that could seriously damage their client's case. Revealing it may help achieve justice, but it could also destroy the lawyer's career and affect their family.

Groups discuss:

- What should the lawyer do?
- What would they gain?
- What might they lose?
- Is there a "right" answer?

2. Hot Seat: One student becomes the lawyer and sits in the "hot seat". Other students question them from different perspectives: a colleague, family member, journalist, client and judge. The student must answer in character.

3. Stage the Decision: Groups create a short scene in which the lawyer makes the decision. The scene should include a moment of silence or stillness immediately before the decision is made. Groups perform their scenes.

4. Change the Outcome: Perform the scene again, but this time make the opposite decision. Discuss how this changes our understanding of the character.

REFLECTION PROMPT:

Can a character make a morally questionable decision and still be sympathetic? What does TOP SILK suggest about the compromises people make when ambition, loyalty and justice collide?



TOP SILK production photos -
Prudence Upton

TEACHING AND LEARNING - ACTIVITY 3

ENGLISH FOCUS: WILLIAMSON'S ARGUMENT — WHO HAS THE POWER?

OVERVIEW:

David Williamson is known for writing dialogue that sounds natural while using conversation to expose conflict, status and competing ideas. This activity asks students to investigate how characters use language as a form of power.

OBJECTIVES:

- To analyse characterisation through dialogue.
- To identify how language reveals power and relationships.
- To explore Williamson's use of humour, argument and subtext.

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Choose a Scene: select a short extract from TOP SILK containing an argument or disagreement between two characters. Read the scene aloud twice.

2. Become Language Detectives: students annotate the extract, identifying:

- Interruptions and overlaps
- Questions and accusations
- Insults or sarcasm
- Humour
- Changes in tone
- Persuasive language
- Moments of silence or hesitation
- Who gets the final word

3. Who Wins? Students decide which character appears to have greater power at the beginning and end of the scene. Importantly, "winning" does not necessarily mean being correct.

Discuss:

- Who controls the conversation?
- Who changes the subject?
- Who avoids answering?
- Who uses humour as a weapon?
- Does the character with the most authority necessarily have the strongest argument?

4. Put It Into Context: Research Australian attitudes towards lawyers, wealth, professional success and social class in the late 1980s. Compare these with attitudes today.

REFLECTION PROMPT:

How does Williamson use everyday conversation to explore bigger questions about power, privilege and Australian society?



TOP SILK production photos - Prudence Upton

TEACHING AND LEARNING - ACTIVITY 4

ENGLISH FOCUS: 1989 VS 2026 — HAS AUSTRALIA CHANGED?

OVERVIEW:

TOP SILK was written and set in Australia in the 1980s. This activity invites students to investigate whether the concerns raised by Williamson still have relevance today.

OBJECTIVES:

- To compare social contexts across different periods.
- To develop research, discussion and persuasive writing skills.
- To consider how context influences the meaning of a text.

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Build Two Australias: in pairs, create two columns headed 1989 and 2026.

Research and record examples relating to:

- Wealth and inequality
- Gender and workplace expectations
- The legal system
- Professional ambition
- Media influence
- Family expectations
- Attitudes towards success and status

2. Find the Connections: identify three issues that appear in TOP SILK that students believe are still relevant today. For each issue, find one contemporary Australian example from a reputable news source.

3. Become the Critic: imagine you are reviewing the 2026 Ensemble Theatre production. Write a short paragraph responding to: "Does a play written and set in the 1980s still speak to Australia in 2026?" Students should use:

- One example from the play
- One example from contemporary Australia
- Their own response to the production

4. Challenge your Argument: swap responses with another student. The reader must identify one point they agree with and one point they could challenge.

REFLECTION PROMPT:

What has changed since 1989—and what might Williamson recognise immediately in Australia today?



TOP SILK production photos - Prudence Upton