

ASTRO-MAN

BY ALBERT BELZ

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- Please make sure all cell phones are turned off.
- Please don't bring school bags to the theatre.
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Venue: Q Theatre, 305 Queen Street, Auckland

School Matinee: Wednesday 27 March, Tuesday 2 April and Thursday 4 April at 11am

Running Time: 2 hours and 15 minutes, including a 20-minute interval

Post-Show Forum: Takes place in the theatre immediately after the performance (15 – 20 minutes).

Suitability: This production is suitable for Year Levels 9 – 13 (age 13+)

Advisory: Contains frequent use of strong language*, mild sexual themes and threats of violence**

* racial, gender and homophobic slurs

** threatening use of a shotgun/reference to suicide

ASTROMAN

BY ALBERT BELZ

An Auckland Theatre Company co-production with
Te Rēhia Theatre Company in association with Auckland Arts Festival

CAST

Jim — **Levi Kereama**

Michelle (Mum) — **Miriama McDowell** | Mrs Mahara (teacher) — **Nicola Kawana**

Sonny — **Kauri Williams** | Natalie — **Rickylee Russell-Waipuka**

Mick — **Aaron McGregor** | Mr Macrae — **Gavin Rutherford**

CHORUS

Takanini Fulla-Girl — **Brady Peeti** | Dynasty — **Tatum Warren-Ngata**

Dallas — **Tyler Wilson Kōkiri**

CREATIVE

Playwright — **Albert Belz** | Director — **Tainui Tukiwaho**

Set Designer — **John Verryt** | Lighting Designer — **Jane Hakaraia**

Sound Designer — **Laughton Kora** | Costume Designer — **Louise Davis**

Motion Graphics Designer — **Harley Campbell** | Choreographer — **Justin Haiu**

Assistant Director (Teina) — **Matthew Kereama**

PRODUCTION

Interim Production Managers — **Robert Hunte and Nicole Arrow**

Company Manager — **Elaine Walsh** | Stage Manager — **Michael Clark**

Assistant Stage Manager (Teina) — **Tyler Wilson Kōkiri**

Technical Manager — **Andrew Furness** | SQ and AV Operator — **Spencer Earwaker**

LX Op — **Ruby van Dorp** | Props Master — **Taungaroa Emile**

Set Construction — **2 Construct**

CREATIVE LEARNING

Associate Director — **Lynne Cardy**

Youth Arts Coordinator — **Nicole Arrow**

Teaching Artists — **Ava Diakhaby and Holly Hudson**

Education Pack Writer — **Rita Stone**

Education Pack Editor — **Lynne Cardy**

Production designs courtesy of **John Verryt**

Graphic Design — **Wanda Tambrin**

Production Images — **Michael Smith**



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Astroman was developed with Playwrighting Australia in the
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Astroman, by Albert Belz, was developed with the assistance of
Auckland Theatre Company, Auckland, New Zealand.



Intro- duction

It is 1983 in Whakatane and Hemi (Jim) Te Rehua has a cool Redline BMX, can do a Rubiks cube in a flash, has all the high scores on Donkey Kong Jr and Pac Man and his twin brother Sonny is already in the reps for rugby.

They have a mean break-dancing older sister Natalie, and a tough-talking Mum Michelle (their Dad is away working) and town bully Mick Jones on their case. After an altercation over the BMX, Mr Macrae, the amusement arcade proprietor, steps in and saves the twins from Mick's menace. As recompense Michelle makes Jim work at the Astrocade and both he and Mr Macrae discover Jim's skills with circuit boards and programming. Later Mr Macrae proposes a video game competition—a World Championship for Whakatane, 'Video gaming capital

of the World' and Jim wins. Meanwhile Jim's teacher Mrs Mahara, recognising the boy's genius, starts investigating computer programming courses for him at Auckland University. Still fuming from losing the competition, Mick Jones trashes the Astrocade. Seeing his future in ruins and his past shattered—his beloved wife died recently, Mr Macrae confronts Mick, giving his shotgun to him and demanding that he do what Mr Macrae cannot. [Threatening use of a shotgun is enacted]. Mick bursts into tears —witnessed by Jim and Sonny. Eventually a penitent Mick comes to help them rebuild the Astrocade. The play ends with Jim's Dad returning, the whole family moving to Auckland and all being well in the world.

Synopsis

This is a detailed synopsis, containing spoilers. We recommend using it to recall the sequence of events after you've seen the play.

ACT ONE

Whakatane, 1983. Mr Macrae, proprietor of the Astrocade amusement parlour, stands at the edge of the water looking out at the statue of 'Wairaka of the Reef'.

Later, Jim (Hemi)Te Rehua arrives and greets the audience. It's his fourteenth birthday and his Dad (who he says is in the USA working on President Reagan's 'Star Wars' project) has bought a Redline BMX bike for him and his twin brother, Sonny.

Jim introduces us to Whakatane, and to the "ace-est place in the world" – the Astrocade. He says he is the Astrocade 'master' and joins his brother at the games.

Sonny tells him that local bully Mick Jones has beaten Jim's high score on Galaga. Jim begs Sonny for his 'last man' to try to get the high score back. While Jim is focused on the game, Sonny explains to the audience that his twin is "the best in Whakatane... maybe the whole Bay of Plenty." He adds that his

brother can "just look at a game and see the pattern".

Later, Jim and Sonny emerge from watching *The Karate Kid* at the cinema to discover their new bike has been stolen. Mick Jones rides past on the stolen BMX. They chase him to the Astrocade.

When they get there, Mick is playing Galaga. Sonny and Mick fight but Jim intervenes and makes a deal, offering to give Mick his high scores on the games if they get their bike back.

Mr Macrae enters and bans Mick and his gang from the arcade for two weeks. Mick retorts that his dad is the landlord and says "I don't wanna be here anyway! Half your games don't even work!" Mr Macrae closes the Astrocade and drives the twins' home.

There we meet Michelle, the twins' mother, and Natalie, their older sister and bop crew dancer, who was meant to be minding the boys when they got into trouble.

Jim comes clean with the truth about the bike: it wasn't a present from their father, Jim stole it and Sonny has been hurt because of it. Michelle is not happy with Jim who is on a final warning after getting into trouble in Gisborne where they previously lived. She insists that he must clean the Astrocade to make up for it being closed after the fight.

Time passes and Jim is at school. He has slept through his history test and now he's late for work at the Astrocade but his teacher, Mrs Mahara, insists he finishes the test. He does so quickly answering all the questions correctly and even completing her crossword.

Mrs Mahara brings up Jim's holiday project, entitled "Astroman." She asks him if he copied any of it, which he denies. She tells him to remind his mum about parent-teacher interviews and lets him go.

Back at the arcade, Jim starts working on the circuit boards in one of the game cabinets. Mr Macrae enters and

demands to know what he's up to; he was only supposed to come for one day, but he's been working there for two weeks. Jim has fixed several games by memorizing the manuals in the office. Impressed by his brains, Mr Macrae invites Jim back the next day to fix more broken games.

On the phone to Dad, Michelle tell him that she doesn't like Jim working at the Astrocade. She worries about his obsession with the games and isn't sure about 'crazy' Mr Macrae. She worries Jim is missing his father too much and forgetting his whānau.

At the Astrocade, Jim tinkers with the "Astroman" game and discovers Mr Macrae has never played any of the games, so he teaches him. Jim tells him "you gotta look for the patterns. It's not just remembering them, it's realizing what the pattern is." Inspired by Jim's focus, Mr Macrae tries a game and enjoys himself.



At parent-teacher interviews Mrs Mahara hands Michelle Jim's holiday project. Jim has written about his father who he says is going to be the first Māori astronaut on the moon – which is "all top secret, hush hush." Jim has calculated the co-ordinates to launch a rocket from the Ohakea airbase to the Moon. Mrs Mahara has had Jim's calculations checked and they are perfect. She believes that Jim is nothing short of a genius, and he should be in a special school. But as there isn't one in Whakatane, she reassures Michelle she will try her best to help 'her little prodigy' with extra work and support.

After the meeting, Michelle finds Jim at the arcade and warns him that if he can't focus on school, he'll have to leave his job. Jim fights his mum, but Mr Macrae backs her up and Jim runs off. Alone with Mr Macrae, Michelle shares her fears – they've only been in Whakatane for six months and she's worried that Jim needs more than video games to keep him out of trouble. Mr

Macrae promises to keep an eye on him at the Astrocade so long as he keeps up with his school work, and she reluctantly agrees.

Time passes and Jim seems happy with the new arrangement. Natalie enjoys telling the audience that Jim threw up on stage when he recently received a principal's award at school.

At the Astrocade Jim finds Mr Macrae playing Defender. He has earned the high score by using the Hyperspace button, which Jim calls cheating. Jim explains about the patterns involved in the game. He then asks Mr Macrae why he is always down at the Heads, and explains the story behind the statue of Wairaka, a brave woman who, when facing a challenge, called out to her ancestors "Kia Whakatane au i ahau." (let me act like a man).

Mr Macrae hands Jim a flyer for an upcoming competition at the Astrocade; "The World Championships of Video Games". Jim is excited offering Sonny's bombing skills for making a banner.

Later, Sonny is working on the banner and explains to the audience how news of the competition has created a lot of media attention.

Mick Jones arrives to sign up. He gets into a scuffle with the boys before Sonny offers a solution to their tensions; if Mick goes head to head with Jim and wins, the twins won't go to the Astrocade anymore. If Jim wins, Mick can no longer go there.

At night, Mr Macrae is at the ocean, drinking whiskey and looking at Wairaka's statue.

The competition is a couple of days away and a new game cabinet has arrived but Mr Macrae has hidden it, intending to reveal it on the big day. Impatient, the twins break in during the night. Hunting for the game, they discover a sawn-off shotgun and Sonny gets scared. Jim finds the new game when suddenly a drunk, soaking wet Mr Macrae bursts in. He slumps into his chair, falling asleep. Jim begins drying Mr Macrae's hair, and puts a heater on to warm him, before stealing away.

ACT TWO

It is the day of the competition. Natalie and her dance crew – "The Bay City Boppers" – perform a break-dance routine.

The competition begins. Mick Jones take an early lead. Jim isn't even in the top ten by the time they head into the third round but eventually he gets back into the top three. At the finale, it's the new game, Dragon's Lair played by Mick, Jim and one other player.

The final round begins. Jim takes his turn and wins. The crowd goes wild and Mick threatens Jim. Mr Macrae orders Mick and his gang out of the arcade.

That night there is a break-in and all the games are destroyed.

Mr Macrae is devastated. He's spent everything and has no insurance. Suddenly he picks up something wrapped in a blanket and heads out the door. The twins' race after him.

At Mick Jones' house Mr Macrae is wild. He reveals the sawn-off shotgun from under the blanket. Mick denies

smashing up the arcade. Mr Macrae puts the gun to his own head. Having lost everything, he wants Mick to pull the trigger. Mick breaks down and Mr Macrae leaves him crying.

Running home, the twins tell Mum everything. Together they head for the Astrocade.

Michelle finds Mr Macrae drinking whiskey. Insisting that the games must be insured by the hire company she produces a manual that Jim has found to repair the video game cabinets. She knows that Mr Macrae is a builder and that Jim can fix the electronics to get things up and running until the insurance comes through. She supplies her husband's tools and convinces Mr Macrae that he has nothing to lose.

Sonny, Jim and Mr Macrae are busy repairing the games. Mick turns up. His dad has given Mr Macrae free rent for a year and sent Mick over to help. He is intimidated by the other kids and Natalie confronts him about his behaviour.

At school Michelle meet Mrs Mahara

who says she believes there is nothing else she can teach Jim. A couple of universities are interested in him and he could apply for a scholarship, but the authorities want details of Jim's record in Gisborne. Michelle recounts how her husband had been unfairly treated at work and Jim had stepped in to take revenge. She is upset that the authorities had threatened to take her son away then, and that she might lose him again to university.

Mrs Mahara hands Michelle the University of Auckland prospectus, and now it is Mr Macrae's turn to support Michelle saying she has nothing to lose by looking at it.

Later, Mick is alone at the Astrocade when Natalie enters. Mick clearly likes her and has a dance-inspired fantasy about her before she brings him back to reality.

Time passes and Michelle is at work. Jim comes in and finds the Auckland University prospectus. She refers him to the Computer Science courses. He is excited by the idea the family might move

to Auckland, but when Michele explains Jim would go alone, he's not so keen.

It's the day before the arcade re-opens. Natalie tells the boys they must be home early for a special dinner their mum is arranging. Michelle has gone to Waipaoa with Mr Macrae to visit their dad. Sonny and Natalie head off and Mick is alone with Jim. He asks Jim why Natalie doesn't like him.

At the special dinner three guests arrive; Mr Macrae, Mrs Mahara and then Mick. Jim asks why everyone is there, and Michelle explains that it is to celebrate the reopening of the Astrocade. Jim is suspicious and Mr Macrae admits there is another reason. He and Michelle had not been to Waipaoa the day before, they'd been to the University of Auckland and they want to convince Jim to go. Jim storms out of the house. Michelle worries he's as angry as he was when he got into trouble in Gisborne and the adults leap to action.

Mick is left behind with Natalie and asks her on a date to the movies.

Mr Macrae finds Jim at the arcade. Jim is angry and asks for money for fixing all the games. He says he's off to find his father in Waipaoa. Mr Macrae tries to convince him to take the scholarship to Auckland University. He talks about how his wife's death made him very afraid and 'stuck in a pattern' that he just couldn't beat. He says that Jim's family has finally helped him break the pattern and now it's Jim's turn to take the opportunity for change.

Jim admits he's scared, and Michelle enters, saying, "Kia Whakatane au i ahau." She then breaks the news that the whole family will move to Auckland.

At the harbor, Jim comes to say goodbye to Mr Macrae who stares out to the statue of Wairaka. He explains it was his wife's favourite place in the world. Michelle enters and announces that somebody special is arriving on the bus to join them.

Jim puts his sunglasses on and plays one final game of Astroman.

Creating Astroman

Rita Stone talked to Albert Belz about the process of writing the play.



Albert Belz was born in Whakatane in 1973 and is of Ngāti Porou, Nga Puhī and Ngāti Pokai descent. He was a professional actor before becoming a writer for the stage and screen and some may still remember his character, Manny Atutahi, from Shortland Street in 1992.

The first play he wrote was *Te Maunga* in 2001, followed by *Awhi Tapu* in 2003. In 2006, *Yours Truly* won the Best New Zealand Play and Most Original Play at the Chapman Tripp awards and the Bruce Mason Playwriting Award 2006 for Best Emerging New Zealand Playwright. Following that,

*Raising the Titanic*s toured New Zealand and won The New Zealand Listener's Best New Zealand Play in 2010.

Astroman was first written by Belz as a story in 2012, and its world premieres were produced on two stages within hours of each other: The Court Theatre in Christchurch presented *Astroman* only two hours ahead of the Melbourne Theatre company in Australia in November 2018.

What inspired you to write *Astroman*?

I wanted to write something upbeat and empowering for an audience. I wanted to write something that made audiences laugh as much as it made

them think. The result turned into this coming-of-age love-letter to the '80s. However, it's more than just a love-letter. *Astroman* is a story about patterns and growth. It's about acknowledging the patterns in our lives, good and bad. It's about discovering the bravery to dare to break the patterns that could destroy us – especially if we're on our last life. Also, it's about embracing the kaleidoscope of patterns that bring colour, opportunity, growth and love into our lives.

What are some of the themes and ideas you wanted to explore in this play?

Whānau is probably the most important theme within the piece. The themes of ethnicity and casual racism, some of which still exist today. I also wanted to touch on themes of mental health but without that theme overwhelming all the others.

Can you describe your writing and development process for *Astroman*?

I originally wrote a story outline for *Astroman* back in 2012. It was set in Whakatane, my old home town. However, my partner and I then moved to Geelong in Australia. A playwriting competition came up there, so I rewrote it and set it in Geelong, and changed the Māori whānau to an indigenous Australian family. I entered this Australian version to the competition, and it won. The piece was then given workshops in Sydney and after that featured at the Australian National Playwriting conference in Adelaide.

There was a real buzz about the piece and several Australian companies were interested in it. However, after two

years, none of them were willing to take a bet on a Kiwi playwright. So, I went back to the original New Zealand version of the story and rewrote it back to its original form. Immediately Kiwi theatre companies were scrambling for it. About that time Melbourne Theatre Company suddenly wanted to produce the Australian version. So, in November 2018, *Astroman* opened in both Melbourne and Christchurch on the same evening. New Zealand won by 2 hours.

Do you see this as a typical New Zealand play? In what way? What do you think New Zealanders will connect with or be challenged by in *Astroman*?

With themes of whānau, yes it does have elements of a typical New Zealand play. However, I have intentionally subverted these elements, especially regarding the father's story. Also, it's not your typical Māori gang boy doing bad stuff just because he's mis-understood which you see in heaps of Māori stories. Instead I wanted to subvert the reason behind society not 'getting' him. This young Māori boy is a genius, his mind is too fast for everybody else – Jim is as much somebody to aspire to as to be intrigued and perhaps even annoyed by. I think audiences will connect with each member of the Te Rehua whānau and also Mister Mcrae. They are very kiwi characters that we'll all recognise.

Listen to Albert talking about his writing influences on Radio New Zealand, here:

<https://www.radionz.co.nz/national/programmes/afternoons/audio/2018685366/albert-belz-on-bookmarks>



TALKING POINTS

- Belz describes *Astroman* as "a coming-of-age love-letter to the '80s. And more than that, it's about patterns and growth." What does he mean by this? How have the sound, set and costume designs supported these ideas?
- Belz mentions three ideas he has touched on in this play; whānau, casual racism and mental health. Can you recall any specific moments, language or dialogue in *Astroman* where these ideas were explored? What was happening on stage in those moments or when the language was used? How did the moments affect you as an audience member?
- Belz mentions that *Astroman* is a typical New Zealand play because of the idea of Whānau. What does he mean by this? In what way has he 'subverted' the element of whānau on stage? Which moments do you recall from the performance where the idea of whānau was upheld?

From the Director

Tainui Tukiwaho talks about what attracted him to *Astroman*



I have been lucky to work with Albert a lot over the past ten years. When he came back to New Zealand with *Astroman* we did a small workshop on an early draft and I was immediately excited.

Albert was telling the story of young Māori boys in the 1980s and I know that we saw this not long ago with (Taika Waititi's film) *Boy*, but the story Albert was telling was the story of the Arcade generation. This was my generation; 20 cent coins, crowded rooms full of screaming machines and flashing lights. Looking back, it was like a casino for kids except these kids weren't getting

any financial return but something far more important – immortality through high scores.

This show clearly struck a chord with me, but not just for the above reasons. Underneath this facade of arcade games, *Karate Kid* and *Eye of the Tiger* there are some deep and important issues that are being explored. As you might imagine of a play set in the 1980s you can find issues of racism, depression, loss and bullying – but addressed with such a subtle and light touch you barely even see it happening, which is a treat for a director and cast to work on.



Playing The Bully



Q & A with actor
Aaron McGregor

The actors who make up the cast of *Astroman* reflect the intergenerational nature of the story, including seasoned professionals, newcomers and 17-year-old secondary school student Levi Kereama in the lead role. During rehearsals, we asked Aaron McGregor, who plays teenage villain Mick Jones, about working on the play, playing the bully, and his background in acting.

What excites you most about this play?

When I first read the audition script, I was like, "this is perfect!" I was given two totally different scenes for Mick, and I could see that this character was not going to be a two dimensional, straight forward bully all the time. It's nice to go through a journey and have a change. And the play is so funny; I love the character of Jim, he's so young, and so immature yet so intelligent, and even Mr Macrae and Mrs Mahara. It's great to see those actors (Gavin Rutherford and Nicola Kawana) find their way so early in process for us

younger actors to learn from. I didn't grow up in the eighties, but I did grow up Lower Hutt, where there is a lot of Māori influence, and I grew up swimming in the rivers; they mention the Whakatane river in the play. I grew up playing these kinds of video games too – we went to Time Zone or Time Out before the movies and would just hang out, so I feel like I connect to the world of the play.

What have been your biggest challenges for you?

Being the only villain in the play and always being in the rehearsal room as the bad guy kind of take its toll after a while. But being part of a great ensemble really helps. We've bonded as a cast and it means we can trust each other and try anything.

How do you portray Mick's journey through the play?

One thing we are trying to get through in rehearsal is the idea that Mick is this bully

at the start, and he bullies these kids, but then you don't see much of his change. He apologises in one scene, which is getting rewritten now. But I am trying to find those moments, how I can portray those moments to the audience where he is going through such a big change. And it's not just changing suddenly, he's going through small steps where he struggles, he doesn't like the change, he tries again, and he slowly climbs up again like a ladder until he gets to that point where he goes, "ok this is where I need to be." And you still don't really see that change, but that is what I am trying to find now, find out what I can do with the time I have in those scenes. Sometimes in the moments without dialogue I can do more, with thoughts and looks, like he's going through change without being direct.

The shotgun scene is a big breaking point for Mick. That's the moment where he says, "I have to change." I've created a backstory for him where things aren't so good at home. He lives with his dad who bullies him in a way and tells him he must be a certain way to be a man in the world. But the funny thing about that scene is that Mr Macrae tries to get Mick to kill him which is scary for a teenage kid, but then Mr Macrae is the one that invites him to dinner at the end. So, he's become kind of like his new role model, his new father because his dad hasn't been there. And Mr Macrae lets Mick go to the shop and fix the damage he's done, which is another big step. That's a big deal – where Mick has destroyed the only thing the old man had left, and yet he gets invited back, and that's a big change for the other kids to witness as well. It's such a big journey over such a small space of time and plotting that through is a real challenge.

How would you describe the relationships between Mick and the other characters?

With Jim and Sonny, right at the start, Mick feels omnipotent towards those kids. He has this unlimited power. But then straight away it's snatched away from him when Mr Macrae wrestles him and tells him to get out. So, the dynamic switches straight away, which I found interesting. He wants to be there, and he likes that arcade, but he can't use it anymore. So, Jim and Sonny use it to their advantage, taunting him and doing the fingers behind the adults' backs. And then Mick flips it back, because he knows Mr Macrae can't touch him in that space either, with the teachers and all the other adults around.

Mick likes Natalie a lot because she's the one that tells him what's up! He's always used to being the dominant force and when someone finally does it back to him, he's freaked out a bit, but he likes that! He's like, oh my god she's just like me! She lets him in and shuns him out a few times; she even calls him a good looking pakeha at one point and then shuts him out again, but he likes that! She's the only one who accepts him after he changes – the one who accepts him right at the end.

ABOUT AARON

Originally from Lower Hutt, Wellington, Aaron has been in an array of short films, TV shows and movies. Some of these include *Choice Night*, *Hitch Hike*, *Every Moment* and *A Bend in the Road*. He has been nominated for Best Actor in a New Zealand Short Film twice. TV shows include *Dear Murderer* and season two of *Filthy Rich*. Movies include *Slow West* and *Deathgasm*. *Astroman* is Aaron's Professional theatre debut and he is looking forward to developing this side of his acting career.



Design



JOHN VERRYT

SET DESIGN – JOHN VERRYT

Astroman is staged in a thrust configuration with the audience on three sides.

The action is set primarily in the Astrocade and moves between Mr Macrae's home, Jim's house and school as well as spilling out onto the streets of Whakatane and down to the Whakatane Heads at the mouth of the river where the statue of Wairaka of the Reef can be seen.

To accommodate these multiple locations John has designed an abstract multi-level set with different areas denoting each location. Mr Macrae's house is upstage, while Jim's house and school are situated around a dining table downstage. The Arcade and streets fill up the middle space.

There are two main entrance and exit points downstage left and right, with crossovers behind the two sides of the thrust for actors to move around. An asymmetrical line separates the lower and upper stage and creates a 400mm

high step up along that line. There are two steps up from lower to upper stage and these form the front entrances. The base colour of the set is black, and it is covered in bright tagging, bombing art, graffiti and video game imagery.

Upstage of the set is a large screen for AV (motion graphics) projections; showing animations of the arcade games being played, including (at times) a live feed of the person playing the game – a small camera is placed on one of the cabinets to capture this. Images on the screen also help the audience to locate various places in the play. The images are rear-projected – they come from behind the screen, not from in front of the screen.

Surrounding the screen is a frame painted with images from the various video games that are mentioned in the play. The game cabinets are treated in the same way; an abstract version of images from the games. Young people from the Kakanoa Youth Trust at Corban Estate Arts Centre in West Auckland are



Set model

assisting with creating the artwork and everyone in the company was given the chance to tag a part of the stage.

A focus for John is creating the game cabinets. Four arcade cabinets have been built to represent those mentioned in the play, and while they have the mechanisms (a joystick and buttons) and a screen built into them, they don't function like a real arcade game.

One of the biggest challenges for John is to make video arcade games with what appears to be 'sensitive technical equipment' inside, that can seem to be smashed to pieces and then restored back to their original state as the play dictates.

TALKING POINTS

- **Why has the designer decided to place his set in a thrust configuration? What effect does it have on the audience who are sitting on the two side sections on the stage?**
- **How has the designer used video arcade game design across the whole set design?**
- **How has the designer resolved the challenge of creating a set that can be smashed to pieces half way through the play? How else might you resolve this challenge?**

Design



JANE HAKARIA

LIGHTING DESIGN – JANE HAKARIA

Most of the lighting designer's work happens once rehearsals start, and they know where actors are going to be and what they are doing onstage, and what the mood of each scene might be like.

In the early stages of design, Jane's focus is on the video games. She decides to put lights inside the cabinets so that when an actor is playing a game, the audience can see that movement or light playing. She intends to create a low-fi effect on three of the game units by using fairy lights, but on the 'hero game' – the one with the camera, Jane opts to have a

light panel that can actually play videos through it, so that when the actors are playing the game their faces will be lit with moving lights.

Jane would also like to replicate that effect all around the balconies of the theatre, so that when the audience enters the space, they feel like they are in the video arcade parlour. In the early stages of lighting design, Jane speaks of creating a "low-fi" effect for most of the lighting, "because it's the eighties – it's old school!"



HARLEY CAMPBELL

MOTION GRAPHICS DESIGN – HARLEY CAMPBELL

Harley's job is to fill the large 5m by 5m screen with motion graphics, and at the same time support the story in a visual way.

He has designed three styles to the AV projections: one is authentic eighties video games, showing real games a few times but not too often. The next is a sketch style which comes from Jim's notebooks; his thoughts, his designs, his school project. Finally, and

in order to fill the screen throughout the show, Harley creates pixel art location backdrops. By taking each location from the script; (ie: places in Whakatane and the Astrocade), and drawing them up in this pixel art style, he emphasizes the 1980s game design aesthetic. The projections have some movement, but the intention is that they are not too distracting from the live action on the stage – a challenge with a screen this size.

Design



SOUND DESIGN – LAUGHTON KORA

Laughton describes himself as a “hard-out gamer.” He was born in Whakatane and feels a deep connection to the setting of the play – “this is my world!”

Laughton began by taking samples from all the eighties video games he could find and using them to inspire soundscapes that reflect moments of game playing and also create atmosphere throughout. He likens it to the all-encompassing noise of an arcade

parlour – “Even now if you go into Time Zone, it’s still the same, the world is still the same.” The biggest challenge with this was to find clarity and avoid the sound becoming too distracting from the action on stage. His main intention was to honour the nostalgia of the piece; “My hope is that all the old school dudes in the audience will be able to name all the games being sampled.” Laughton also intended to create surround sound so that the

noise of the spaceship in a game could come from behind the audience. “For the breakdancing routine in the play, Laughton created a more percussive tune, “almost like haka.” He describes growing up looking at Wairaka every day and using his memories of the water and the statue to compose the music under Mr Macrae’s scenes down by the water. Laughton intends this to be a

more feminine sound, while slipping some video game samples in there too!

Listen to Laughton talking to Jesse Mulligan about creating the soundtrack for *Astroman* on Radio New Zealand, here:

<https://www.radionz.co.nz/national/programmes/afternoons/audio/2018686195/the-making-of-a-great-soundtrack-with-laughton-kora>

TALKING POINTS

- **Jane mentions a ‘hero’ arcade game which she treated differently to the other arcade games on stage. What is meant by this term and why does a designer need to consider treating a ‘hero prop’ differently?**
- **Harley and Laughton both mention the biggest challenge with their sound and motion graphics designs is to aid the storytelling without distracting from the live action. How did they manage to overcome this challenge in their designs?**
- **The designers also speak of aiming for a surround experience. How does this relate to the set design choices, and the writer’s use of breaking the fourth wall or using direct address to the audience?**



Astroman and the New Zealand Theatre Form

"Whakatane, Ohope, Taneatua, Te Puke, Te Rau, Tauranga, Tokoroa... Te Kaha, Te Kaweti... and this one fulla from Takanini in Auckland. The whole world!"

As we have heard, *Astroman* was written by Albert Belz who was born in Whakatane and is of Ngāti Porou, Nga Puhī, Ngāti Pokai descent. It is set in his hometown in the 1980s and centres on 14-year-old Māori twin boys and their community.

The New Zealand theatre form is constantly evolving, and any play written by New Zealanders, about New Zealanders fits the description. However, it is generally accepted that a typical New Zealand play has one or more of the following distinguishing features:

- A concern with New Zealand history
- An exploration of the New Zealand identity and our sense of belonging
- Tikanga Māori vs the world of the Pakeha
- Displacement or loss
- Archetypal New Zealand characters such as rugby players or farmers
- Colloquial New Zealand language and icons.

In *Astroman*, Belz has incorporated local legends such as the story of Wairaka, New Zealand local geography in iconic parts of Whakatane, and colloquial New Zealand language which includes a unique mix of Te Reo Māori and English such as:

- "Aw, **kia ora** you fulliz!"
- "Don't let Jim **taahe** the money for the movie."

- "... the little monkey down the bottom was searching for his ol man gone **'tipi-haere.'**"
- "...crazy old Scottish crack-pot who lived all by himself. So **porangi...**"

And even a new word **'Ataraunaut'** - created by Belz to describe the Jim's vision of first Māori astronaut.

QUESTIONS

1. Looking at the quotations above, why do you think Belz has chosen these particular words to be in Te Reo Māori? What do the words mean? How would it have been different if these words had been in English?
2. Looking at the list of features of the New Zealand Theatre Form, how has each one been explored in *Astroman*? Can you think of moments or characters from the play that fit into the descriptions of these features?
3. How have the designers (Set, Costume, Sound, Lights and Motion Graphics) supported the setting of Whakatane and New Zealand in the 1980s?
4. Find out the full story of Wairaka of the Reef. How has Belz used this story to create a metaphor for Jim's journey?
5. Mrs Mahara, says "It's important to know your New Zealand history." To which Jim replies, "Abel Tasman, Richard Seddon and Captain Cook ain't my history." What is the playwright suggesting with this dialogue and how does it explore a feature of the New Zealand Theatre Form?

Post-Show Activities

THINK ABOUT the performance you have seen and recall which characters, scenes or specific moments stood out for you. It could be something you enjoyed, or something that confused you. What was it about it that you remember most?

- Make a list of these characters, ideas or moments that stood out for you
- Recall how you responded in the moment to these characters or moments. And did that reaction change after you had seen the play or discussed it with other people??
- How would you describe the play to a friend?

CHOOSE THE DRAMATIC CONVENTIONS such as direct address, dance, split stage or dream sequence used in the play.

- Make a list of the conventions that were used by the writer or the director in this play
- Explain how the conventions were used and what purpose they had in supporting the narrative.
- If you were to use any other conventions in this play, what might you choose and how would you use it?

CHOOSE ONE CHARACTER who went through a significant change in the play.

- Describe the character.
- Make a list of how the actor used the Techniques of Drama (Voice, Body, Movement, Space)
- Choose one technique from your list and explain how the actor used that technique to illustrate the significant change for the character.



Resources and Additional Reading

Read about the cast and creative team:

<https://www.atc.co.nz/auckland-theatre-company/2018-19/astroman/>

Playmarket NZ lists more information about Albert Belz's work:

<https://www.playmarket.org.nz/playwrights/albert-belz>

Read more about Te Rehia Theatre company:

<https://terehiatheatre.com/about-us-te-kaupapa/>

You can play '80s style Arcade games:

<https://emulatoronline.com/games/arcade/>

Read more about the Court Theatre, Christchurch premier of Astroman:

<https://courttheatre.org.nz/news/astroman/>

Review of the Melbourne Theatre Company production:

<https://www.timeout.com/melbourne/theatre/astroman-review>

ATC Creative Learning – encouraging acts of imagination

ATC CREATIVE LEARNING promotes and encourages teaching and participation in theatre and acts as a resource for secondary and tertiary educators. It is a comprehensive and innovative arts education programme designed to nurture young theatre practitioners and audiences.

Whether we are unpacking a play, creating a new work, or learning new skills we are encouraging habits of

thinking that foster acts of imagination to take place.

ATC Creative Learning has direct contact with secondary school students throughout the greater Auckland region with a focus on delivering an exciting and popular programme that supports the Arts education of Auckland students and which focuses on curriculum development, literacy, and the Arts.

Curriculum Links

ATC EDUCATION activities relate directly to the PK, UC and CI strands of the NZ Curriculum from levels 5 to 8. They also have direct relevance to many of the NCEA achievement standards at all three levels.

All secondary school Drama students (Years 9 to 13) should be experiencing live theatre as a part of their course work, Understanding the Arts in Context. Curriculum levels 6, 7 and 8 (equivalent to years 11, 12 and 13)

require the inclusion of New Zealand drama in their course of work.

The NCEA external examinations at each level (Level 1 – AS90011, Level 2 – AS91219, Level 3 – AS91518) require students to write about live theatre they have seen. Students who are able to experience fully produced, professional theatre are generally advantaged in answering these questions.

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