

Insight Text Guide
Anica Boulanger-Mashberg

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Così

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Louis Nowra

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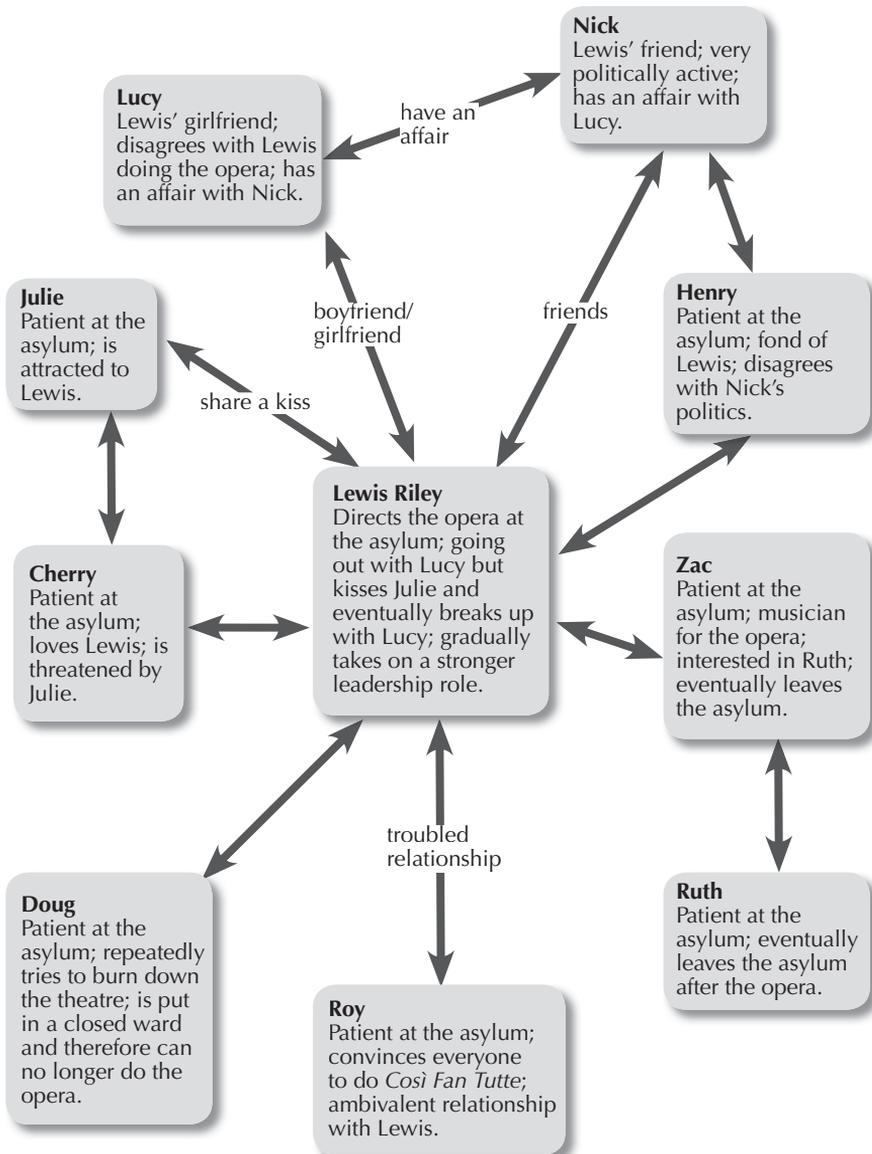
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CHARACTER MAP



OVERVIEW

About the author

Louis Nowra was born in Melbourne in 1950 and lives in Australia. He is a prolific writer and has published works across many genres, including screenplays, radio plays, newspaper articles, translations, novels and autobiographies. He is probably best known, however, for his extensive body of work for the stage.

Early days

Nowra's childhood was not particularly happy, and his parents, who had a difficult relationship, often physically or emotionally abused him. His school life was a challenge too (although he enjoyed sports, particularly cricket) and was complicated by a severe head injury suffered in early adolescence, which for some time made concentration and communication difficult for him. He attended La Trobe University in Melbourne, and although he did not complete an undergraduate degree, he was awarded an Honorary Doctorate in 1996 from Griffith University, Queensland, in honour of his contributions to Australian literature.

The young Louis had connections with the theatre – one of his uncles was a stage manager – and his memoirs describe some of his first experiences with the stage. These early impressions influenced many of his plays.

Works

One of Nowra's first plays, *Kiss the One-Eyed Priest*, was produced in 1973 at La Mama, a Melbourne theatre with a tradition of supporting new Australian works. More than ten full-length plays followed, including *Inner Voices* (1977), *The Golden Age* (1985), *Summer of the Aliens* (1992), *Radiance* (1993), *The Incorruptible* (1995) and *Così* (1992). He wrote screenplays for the film versions of *Radiance* and *Così*, and also published two memoirs, *The Twelfth of Never* (1999) and *Shooting the Moon: A Memoir* (2004). His radio plays, many of which have been produced by ABC radio, include a version of *Summer of the Aliens*, later adapted for the stage.

Nowra has also written several novels, the most recent of which, *Ice* (2008), was shortlisted for the 2009 Miles Franklin Literary Award. Other awards include the Canada–Australia Literary Award (1993), a Logie for Most Outstanding Documentary in 2009 for the television series *First Australians* (co-written with Rachel Perkins and Beck Cole) and the 1994 Victorian Premier’s Literary Award for his play *The Temple*. He has also won several awards for *Così*, including the Play Award in the 1992 NSW Premier’s Literary Awards, and an AFI Award in 1996 for Best Adapted Screenplay. Nowra’s broad writing experience also encompasses a number of collaborations with composers (including Sarah de Jong, his first wife), film directors and other screenwriters.

Nowra’s works cover a broad range of eras and geographical and social settings, including Russia, historical Latin America and contemporary Sarajevo. Alongside these international settings, Nowra also regularly sets his works in Australia, and several of his works, including *Radiance*, are concerned with the experiences of Indigenous Australians. A theme common in much of Nowra’s work is the idea of outsiders: *Così*, like another of his best-known plays, *The Golden Age*, presents characters that are outcasts from society and damaged human beings. In *Così*, this is very blatant: the patients in the asylum are obviously individuals who don’t fit into the outside world. However, within the asylum and the opera production they develop a sense of purpose and community.

Nowra also worked as a director and a drama teacher, and had an extremely brief career as an actor when he stepped in at short notice to play the role of the narrator in a production of *Summer of the Aliens*. Apparently, everyone thought he’d be better off if he concentrated on writing.

Synopsis

(Note: for the purposes of this guide Mozart’s opera will always be referred to as *Così Fan Tutte*, and the shorter title, *Così*, will refer to Nowra’s play. The only exception will be when quoting the text directly, where the characters may call the opera *Così*.)

Set in 1971 in a burnt-out theatre adjoining a mental institution in Melbourne, *Così* is the story of an unconventional production of Mozart’s opera *Così Fan Tutte*. Lewis, a recent university graduate, finds himself

employed to direct a play with a group of patients in a mental institution. Lewis' university education has not prepared him for such a demanding task, a challenge increased by the explosive blend of personalities within the group. The characters' relationships are the basis for the tensions and conflicts of the play, but are also responsible for much of *Così's* humour.

On arriving at the asylum, Lewis meets the patients who have 'volunteered' to participate (some more willingly than others). The company comprises Zac, a musician who is usually heavily drugged; Doug, whose high energy and unreserved interpersonal style is coupled with an unhealthy fascination with fire; Henry, whose shyness is balanced by his passion for Australia's military history; Cherry, a jealousy-prone, sex-obsessed live wire; Ruth, anxious and relentlessly rational with obsessive tendencies; and Julie, a hairdresser with a drug dependency. And then there's Roy.

Roy, the group's natural leader, has his heart set on producing *Così Fan Tutte*: an opera he adores and that he believes is endowed with the power to make the whole world more beautiful. Roy has trouble convincing Lewis and the others that *Così* (as he affectionately calls it) has any value at all: they think it old-fashioned, dull and irrelevant. And besides, nobody in the group speaks Italian, and many can barely sing. For Roy, these obstacles are merely challenges, and it is his determination and passion (sometimes misplaced, engendering frustration in the others), which drive the rehearsals. Often in conflict with Lewis over the progress of the show, Roy has a tendency to make his criticisms very personal, not just aiming them at Lewis' directing skills, but also discrediting his character.

The production faces many setbacks, including Doug's arson attempt on the theatre (and his subsequent admission to the closed ward) and Roy's paralysing attack of stage fright, but the process of overcoming these trials strengthens the participants as individuals and as a group. When Doug is confined to the closed ward, Lewis reluctantly steps into the role of Ferrando and begins to genuinely commit to the production (to the exclusion of other aspects of his life). The production began as an 'experiment' (p.22) which was intended to bring the patients 'out of their shells' (p.6), but in the end, it is perhaps Lewis who comes out of his shell the most.

During the rehearsal period, we also meet Lucy and Nick, Lewis' girlfriend and best friend, who represent the world outside the asylum. As the patients and the opera gradually become Lewis' main concern, Lucy and Nick continue their protests against the Vietnam War and their fight against capitalism: convictions once shared by all three. Lewis' shifting priorities are a source of conflict between the friends and, as Lucy and Lewis drift further apart, Lucy grows closer to Nick. Nick and Lucy, who think that Lewis has sold out on them, eventually reveal that they've been having an affair.

At the conclusion of the play, *Così Fan Tutte* is finally performed. Lewis farewells his cast; delivers a monologue to the audience, informing us about what happens to the characters of *Così* in the future; and then turns out the lights in the theatre – a symbolic as well as a practical close to the narrative.

Character summaries

Lewis Riley

Central character; fresh from university; not very confident; comes to the asylum to work with the patients. Lives with his girlfriend, Lucy (and their friend Nick), but shares a kiss with Julie (a patient). Becomes more confident through the opera, rises to the challenge, and eventually chooses the production over Lucy and a life of student politics.

Roy

Central character; patient in the asylum; driving force behind the production of *Così Fan Tutte*. Grew up in orphanages and with foster parents, but has constructed a fictional childhood of joy and high culture. Swings wildly between moods of excitement and depression. Roy is passionate but his blind and unrealistic dreams of greatness alienate him from the others.

Doug

Brazen and confident; high-energy; constantly challenging others, either physically or by confronting them verbally or emotionally. Has a history of pyromania and a disturbed relationship with his mother. Doug is

resistant to participating in the opera, but keen to be a part of the group, if only to stir things up.

Henry

Once a lawyer; once married; now a long-term resident in institutions. Painfully shy, Henry has an almost debilitating stutter and a paralysed arm (eventually revealed to be of psychological rather than physiological origin). He is preoccupied with military history and memories of his parents. Physically strong; violent when he becomes angry; protective of Lewis, for whom he slowly develops a quiet affection.

Julie

Short-term patient in the asylum due to drug dependency. Sees life in terms of drugs; loves the opera because it gets her out of the oppressive ward and makes her feel alive – like drugs. She is attracted to Lewis (they kiss) but eventually confesses that she has a girlfriend to whom she is returning when she leaves.

Cherry

Has been in institutions for some time; has aggressive, violent tendencies – especially when she feels her affections have been thwarted. Preoccupied with food and with sex; jealous of Lewis and Julie's relationship. She is the only patient who really stands up to Roy.

Zac

Musician; often heavily drugged and sometimes in and out of consciousness during rehearsals. Thinks Mozart's music is boneless and would rather be doing Wagner. Preoccupied with sex and tries to proposition Ruth.

Ruth

An obsessive woman who lacks confidence and has anxiety issues; has been in violent relationships. Ruth struggles to comprehend differences between reality, illusion and pretending. Eventually stands up for herself against Zac.

Lucy

Lives with Lewis, her boyfriend, and their friend Nick. She is a university student, a passionate protester against the Vietnam War, and a fighter for social justice. Has an affair with Nick and breaks up with Lewis.

Nick

Lewis' friend; lives with Lewis and Lucy. Passionate supporter of communists in Vietnam, and protester against the war. Also a director of theatre he feels is socially worthy (like Brecht). Is insensitive towards the patients, treating them as clichéd 'crazy' people; has an affair with Lucy.

Justin

Incidental character; social worker responsible for setting up the theatre project. Introduces Lewis to the patients, and gives Lewis (and the audience) some simplistic pointers on how to handle the patients and the situation.