

A Technical and Analytical Deep Dive into Michael Gow's 'Away': Structure, Symbolism, and Socio-Historical Context

Published: February 4, 2026 | Index ID: #423

Michael Gow's **Away**, first performed by the Griffin Theatre Company in 1986, stands as a seminal work in the canon of Australian dramatic literature. Often cited as a masterpiece of the 20th century, the play serves as a profound meditation on reconciliation, grief, and the shifting social landscape of late-1960s Australia. This article provides a comprehensive technical analysis of the play, exploring its Shakespearean architecture, its use of symbolism, and its linguistic nuances, specifically focusing on how Gow utilizes domestic settings to explore universal human experiences.

1. The Theoretical Framework: Shakespearean Architecture in Modern Drama

One of the most striking technical features of **Away** is its explicit adherence to a **Shakespearean five-act structure**. Gow does not merely reference William Shakespeare; he embeds the mechanics of the Bard's comedies and tragedies into the very fabric of his narrative. This structural choice provides a rhythmic and thematic backbone that elevates the suburban domesticity of the characters to the level of high art.

The Five-Act Progression

The play follows a traditional dramatic arc that mirrors the movement of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—moving from the rigidity of the city (the school performance) to the chaos and transformation of the wild (the beach/storm) and back to a state of enlightened resolution.

- Act I (Exposition): Establishes the three disparate family units and their internal conflicts against the backdrop of a high school production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.
- Act II (Complication): The families depart for their respective holidays, carrying with them the psychological baggage of class tension, illness, and mourning.
- Act III (The Climax/The Storm): A literal and metaphorical tempest serves as the catalyst for change, stripping away the characters' societal pretenses.
- Act IV (Resolution/The Beach): A period of healing and reconciliation where characters confront their mortality and their relationships.
- Act V (Denouement): The return to a new school year, marked by a reading of *King Lear*, signifying a movement from the lightness of comedy to the gravity of mature acceptance.

2. Technical Analysis of Character Archetypes and Dynamics

The play revolves around three distinct family units, each representing a different facet of Australian middle-class life in the 1960s. The technical execution of these characters relies on the juxtaposition of their public personas and their private suffering.

Comparison Matrix: The Three Families

Family Unit	Key Characters	Primary Internal Conflict	Symbolic Anchor
The British Immigrants	Harry, Vic, Tom	Tom's terminal illness (Leukemia) and the parents' attempt to provide a "perfect" final holiday.	The battered suitcase / The performance.
The Aspirant Middle Class	Gwen, Jim, Meg	Gwen's obsessive materialism and social anxiety vs. Meg's burgeoning independence.	The Caravan / The new camper.
The Institutional Elite	Roy, Coral	The loss of their son in the Vietnam War and Roy's demand for Coral to "perform" normalcy.	The Gold Coast Hotel / The pills.

3. Linguistic Mechanics: Prepositions and Physical Space

Research into the linguistics of the play, such as the study *"Preposition in Drama Away by Michael Gow"*, highlights the technical importance of spatial language. Prepositions in the play are not merely grammatical connectors; they define the emotional distance between characters. The recurring use of the preposition **"away"** itself suggests a movement from the center to the periphery, from the known to the unknown.

The Semantics of "Away"

The term "Away" functions as a technical trigger for transformation. In the context of the play, it operates in three dimensions:

1. Physical Locality: Moving from the suburbs to the coast.
2. Psychological State: Escaping from the trauma of war (Coral) or the reality of death (Harry and Vic).
3. Metaphorical Departure: Tom's impending departure from life.

4. Staging and Scenography: The Magic Realism of the Storm

From a technical production standpoint, the transition from Act III to Act IV presents significant challenges and opportunities for scenographers. Gow utilizes **The Storm** as a theatrical device to facilitate the *anagnorisis* (recognition) of the characters. The storm must be staged not just as a meteorological event, but as a ritualistic cleansing.

Technical Execution of the Storm Scene

Directorial approaches often utilize minimalist staging to emphasize the internal shift. The "magic" of the play is found in its ability to blend the mundane (a campsite) with the mythical (the presence of fairies/the storm). Technicians must balance:

- Auditory Landscapes: Using soundscapes to transition from the "real" sounds of the 1960s (radio, chatter) to the "abstract" sounds of the tempest.
- Lighting Design: Shifting from the harsh, bright sunlight of the Australian summer to the deep, transformative blues and shadows of the coastal night.
- Prop Semiotics: The destruction of Gwen's caravan represents the breaking of her rigid social armor.

5. Socio-Historical Context: Australia at the Crossroads

To understand the technical depth of *Away*, one must analyze its setting: **Summer 1967-1968**. This was a pivotal moment in Australian history, characterized by several key factors that Gow integrates into the narrative:

The Vietnam War and National Trauma

The character of Coral is the emotional vessel for the nation's grief. Her son's death in Vietnam is not just a personal tragedy but a technical representation of the cost of the Menzies-era policies. Her inability to "act" the part of the headmaster's wife reflects a broader social fracture where the old colonial ties (represented by Britain and the war) are no longer sufficient to sustain the Australian identity.

The Shift in Class Identity

Gwen and Jim represent the post-war boom and the rise of the "Great Australian Dream." Gwen's dialogue is technically constructed to showcase her anxiety about maintaining status. Her obsession with **meritocracy** and **cleanliness** serves as a defense mechanism against her own humble beginnings, a theme that is dissected through her interactions with the working-class Harry and Vic.

6. The Play-Within-A-Play: Mise-en-Abyme

Gow employs the *mise-en-abyme* technique by starting the play with the conclusion of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and concluding it with the beginning of *King Lear*. This is a deliberate technical choice that signals the characters' journey from the innocence of comedy to the wisdom of tragedy.

The Role of Tom as the Director/Protagonist

Tom acts as a bridge between the audience and the narrative. His role as Puck in the school play is a meta-commentary on his role in the lives of the other characters. He is the "magical" agent who facilitates Coral's return to reality. His performance of the "Stranger on the Shore" routine is a technical masterclass in physical theater, using clowning to address the heavy theme of mortality.

7. Case Study: Comparative Analysis of Thematic Resolution

In this section, we evaluate how different characters achieve resolution through the technical device of the beach setting.

Character	Initial State (Act I)	Catalytic Event (Act III/IV)	Resolved State (Act V)
Gwen	Repressed, judgmental, materialistic.	Loss of possessions in the storm; walk on the beach with Jim.	Softened, vulnerable, appreciative of her family.
Coral	Catatonic, disconnected, grieving.	Interaction with Tom; the "Stranger on the Shore" performance.	Re-engaged with reality; capable of moving forward.
Meg	Resentful, seeking independence.	Confrontation with Gwen's fragility.	Mature, empathetic, transition to adulthood.

8. Implementation Guide: Analyzing 'Away' for Performance and Study

For educators and theater practitioners, a technical breakdown of *Away* requires a multi-layered approach. Follow this step-by-step procedural guide to deconstructing the text:

1. Identify the Shakespearean Parallels: Map specific scenes in *Away* to their counterparts in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Look for the "love potion" equivalents (the emotional shifts) and the "woods" (the beach).
2. Analyze the Rhythms of Dialogue: Contrast the staccato, nervous energy of Gwen's speech with the lyrical, almost ethereal quality of Tom's monologues.
3. Evaluate the Use of Music: Music is a technical tool in *Away*. From the Mendelssohn of the opening to the popular songs of the 60s, examine how sound design signals shifts in time and mood.
4. Physicality and Space: Determine how the stage should be divided. How does the transition from the claustrophobic school hall to the expansive beach affect the actors' movements?

9. Troubleshooting Common Interpretations

When analyzing or producing *Away*, several common pitfalls can obscure the technical brilliance of the work. Here are solutions to frequent interpretive challenges:

- Problem: Over-emphasizing the comedy of Gwen's character, making her a caricature.
Solution: Focus on the underlying fear and trauma in her backstory. Her "snappiness" is a technical symptom of deep-seated insecurity.
- Problem: Staging the storm too literally, losing the metaphorical impact.
Solution: Use expressionistic techniques. The storm is a psychological event as much as a physical one.
- Problem: Treating Tom's illness as a sentimental plot point.
Solution: Emphasize Tom's agency. He is not a victim; he is the catalyst for everyone else's growth. His knowledge of his death gives him a technical advantage over the "healthy" characters who are spiritually dead.

10. Broader Implications and Modern Legacy

The enduring power of *Away* lies in its ability to synthesize the specific with the universal. While deeply rooted in 1960s Australiana—references to the campers, the Holden cars, and the specific class markers of the era—the play addresses the technical problem of **human suffering** and the necessity of **communal healing**.

As the play reaches its 35th anniversary and beyond, its technical structure continues to offer new insights into the Australian psyche. It suggests that the only way to move "away" from trauma is to walk directly through it, often with the help of the "other." The play's concluding movement toward *King Lear* reminds the audience that while the

holiday (the comedy) must end, the wisdom gained in the "wild" is what allows us to face the tragedies of real life with grace and fortitude.

In the final analysis, Michael Gow's *Away* is not just a story about three families on holiday; it is a meticulously engineered piece of dramatic machinery designed to produce a specific catharsis. Through its use of intertextuality, its rigorous five-act structure, and its profound understanding of the semiotics of the Australian landscape, it remains a definitive guide for understanding the intersection of personal grief and national identity.

Baca Juga (Artikel Terkait)

- [A Comprehensive Technical Analysis of Wesley Enoch's Black Medea: Synthesizing Greek Tragedy and Indigenous Narrative](http://www.amotionselfie.com/technical-analysis-wesley-enoch-black-medea-indigenous-tragedy.pdf)

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Tags: #Michael Gow #Away Play Analysis #Australian Literature #Shakespearean Structure #Dramatic Theory

