

PIKE RIVER EDUCATION RESOURCE

DRAMA + PERFORMANCE

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES | YEARS 10–13

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Contents

Page 3.	MONOLOGUES OF MEMORY
Page 4.	TABLEAU OF PROTEST
Page 5.	ETHICS IN PERFORMANCE WORKSHOP
Page 6.	VERBATIM THEATRE WORKSHOP
Page 7.	STAGING SILENCE



“WHAT DREW ME TO PIKE RIVER WAS THE EMOTIONAL TRUTH BEHIND THE HEADLINES — THE FRIENDSHIP, THE GRIT, AND THE REFUSAL TO BE ROLLED OVER BY POWER, EVEN THROUGH GRIEF. FOR PERFORMERS, IT'S A CHANCE TO EMBODY THAT STRENGTH AND SHOW HOW COURAGE CAN SHIFT THE COURSE OF EVENTS.”

ROBERT SARKIES | DIRECTOR

MONOLOGUES OF MEMORY

OBJECTIVE

Understand shifting public memory and accountability.

Help students consider how storytellers can give voice to experiences they have not lived, and the ethical choices involved in representing those perspectives.

DESCRIPTION

Invite students to step into the shoes of someone connected to Pike River by crafting a short monologue (2–3 minutes).

Possible figures include —

- A miner preparing for a shift.
- A family member waiting at the fence for news.
- An official or journalist delivering updates to the public.
- An activist campaigning for justice and accountability.

Focus on —

- Testimony from the Royal Commission or news interviews
- Family statements and public speeches.
- Dramatised scenes from the film, such as families gathering at the fence or moments of protest.

Reflect together on the responsibilities performers carry when portraying trauma, and how thoughtful creative decisions can protect, respect, and uphold the dignity of those affected.

TASK

Students write and rehearse their monologues.

View the Melanie Lynsky, Robyn Malcom, and Lucy Lawless actor interviews to see how these performers approached their roles.

Performances are shared in class, with optional discussion afterward about interpretive choices and emotional impact.

OUTCOME

Students will —

Develop empathy and performance skills, learning to channel complex emotions with respect.

Engage critically with the ethics of representation, recognising the weight of giving voice to real stories.

Fosters an atmosphere of compassionate listening and shared responsibility in the classroom.

TABLEAU OF PROTEST

OBJECTIVE

Explore how visual performance can communicate resilience, grief, and collective memory without words.

DESCRIPTION

In small groups, students create frozen tableaus (still images brought to life through the body) representing pivotal Pike River moments, such as —

- The explosion announcement.
- Families gathered at the fence waiting for updates.
- Protest actions demanding accountability and justice.

Encourage students to think carefully about composition and symbolism —

Body language — how posture and gesture communicate despair, defiance, or unity.

Levels and spacing — how power, vulnerability, and relationship can be shown visually.

Focus points — who or what draws the audience's eye, and why.

Integrate soundscapes to add emotional resonance —

- News reports or archival audio.
- Protest chants or crowd noise.
- Silence — allowing absence of sound to emphasise grief or reflection.

Support students to explore how non-verbal storytelling can hold as much power as spoken words. Explore how simple symbols — a helmet, a fence, a candle — can convey layered meaning.

TASK

Groups rehearse and present their tableaus to the class.

Afterward, discuss the interpretive choices made — what emotions were evoked, what messages were conveyed, and how symbolism was used?

OUTCOME

Students will —

Gain skills in non-verbal communication and symbolic performance.

Deepen their emotional understanding of Pike River's human and social impact.

Encourage collaboration, creativity, and sensitivity when representing moments of collective grief and resilience.

ETHICS IN PERFORMANCE WORKSHOP

OBJECTIVE

Critically examine the ethical responsibilities that come with performing stories of trauma and lived experience.

Discuss real-world examples — how have theatre-makers, filmmakers, or journalists been praised (or criticised) for the way they've represented trauma?

DESCRIPTION

In this workshop, students create and rehearse short scenes inspired by **Pike River** (e.g., families at the fence, the trial, or moments of protest).

Build in ‘pause points’ where the class stops mid-rehearsal to reflect on —

Respect — Are the voices and perspectives being represented with dignity?

Audience impact — How might survivors, whānau, or community members respond to this portrayal?

Consent — Who ‘owns’ a story, and who has the right to tell it?

Emotional weight — How should performers manage their own wellbeing when engaging with difficult material?

Encourage students to think about the difference between artistic expression and exploitation, and how tone, gesture, or delivery can shift the meaning of a performance.

TASK

Students write a reflective essay (600–800 words) exploring what they discovered during the workshop.

Prompts could include —

- What ethical dilemmas did you notice while performing or watching your peers?
- How can performers honour lived experience while still creating art?
- Where is the line between evoking emotion and causing harm?

OUTCOME

Students will —

Build ethical awareness as performers and storytellers.

Gain insight into how performance can respectfully engage with trauma while fostering empathy and critical reflection.

Practice reflective writing that connects personal experience to wider ethical frameworks in drama and storytelling.

VERBATIM THEATRE WORKSHOP

OBJECTIVE

Use real words to explore narrative truth and the ethical responsibilities of performance.

DESCRIPTION

Introduce students to the concept of verbatim theatre — a form of drama where dialogue is drawn directly from real interviews, testimony, or documents.

Provide excerpts from family testimonies, news reports, court transcripts, or archival speeches relating to Pike River.

Guide students in shaping these into short performance pieces (2–4 minutes), performed individually or in small groups.

Before performing, hold a discussion about —

- **Ownership of words** — who said them, and what context they were spoken in.
- **Accuracy vs. interpretation** — what happens when words are placed in a new performance frame?
- **Emotional responsibility** — how to respect the people whose voices are being represented.

After the performances, debrief as a group. How did it feel to perform someone else's lived words? How did hearing them aloud change the impact of the testimony?

TASK

Perform verbatim pieces for the class.

Write a reflective response (400–600 words) considering —

- What choices did you make in tone, gesture, and delivery?
- How did performing or witnessing these words affect your understanding of Pike River?
- What are the ethical challenges of bringing real voices into the classroom?

OUTCOME

Students will —

Gain an appreciation of the power and responsibility of performance when dealing with real testimony.

Learn to handle sensitive material with care while developing skills in interpretation, empathy, and critical reflection.



STAGING SILENCE

OBJECTIVE

Explore silence as a powerful storytelling and commemorative device.

DESCRIPTION

Begin by discussing moments of silence in public life — e.g., vigils held for the Pike River miners, ANZAC Day ceremonies, or school assemblies after tragedy. Invite students to reflect on how silence can express what words cannot.

In small groups, students devise short scenes (2–3 minutes) where silence carries the emotional weight of the story.

Suggested contexts for **Pike River** scenes —

- Families waiting at the mine fence, listening for news.
- A protest moment, where words are deliberately withheld.
- A family home after the explosion, captured in stillness and unspoken loss.

Consider how intentional silence influences audience perception, building tension, respect, or solidarity, and how silence itself can operate as a symbol of remembrance, protest, or resilience.

TASK

Groups perform their silent scenes for the class.

After each performance, hold a discussion — *What emotions were evoked? What story did the silence communicate?*

Students write a short reflective journal entry (200–400 words) on how silence shaped meaning in their piece.

OUTCOME

Students will —

Deepen their understanding of non-verbal storytelling and its emotional resonance.

Develop skills in physical expression, symbolism, and collective performance.

Experience how silence can be both a tool of grief and a form of resistance, connecting theatrical work with real-world commemoration practices.

