

# *Cosi* – Study Notes

## The setting

“The time is 1971. The play is set in a Melbourne mental institution.” Such is the description for the setting of the play. There are some historical and social facts which need to be drawn out here. Firstly, there is a backdrop of social unrest to the play. In 1971 the Vietnam war had been going for nearly ten years (since 1962). Opposition to the war had increased the longer it had gone on and rallies and protests against the war had begun to increase along with movements for other causes such as equal rights for women and anti racism protests.

There is another important element to the historical background to the play – people’s attitudes towards the mentally ill. Attitudes towards the mentally ill in the 1960s and 1970s were predominantly negative: “the topics of mental health in general and persons with mental illness in particular ... were of limited concern to the public. Mental illness was a topic most often treated by individuals and families as a “private matter” that was more or less off-limits to outsiders, except, perhaps, medical professionals and other family members.” (from *Public Attitudes Toward Persons With Mental Illness* by Andrew B. Borinstein).

The physical setting of the play is “A burnt out theatre” with “a bit of a hole” in the roof and some problems with the wiring. The physical dereliction of the theatre represents, on one level, the attitudes people have towards the mentally ill – neglectful – and where the mentally ill find themselves in society – on the edge, ignored. There is also another symbolic level to the setting. In the opening scene, the theatre is “pitch black inside.” The entrance of Lewis, Nick and Lucy brings a “chink of daylight”. This very much symbolizes a physical crossing from the ‘normal’ world into a different world not seen from the outside. It marks the beginning of a journey for Lewis.

## The narrative

*Cosi* is named after the opera *Cosi Fan Tutte* which Lewis helps the members of the mental institution put on. The narrative structure of the play parallels the structure of the opera. Both are divided into Two Acts.

The opera *Cosi Fan Tutte* tells the story of two officers, Guglielmo (played by Roy) and Ferrando (played by Doug then by Lewis), who are challenged by an old philosopher, Don Alphonso, to put the fidelity of their lovers, Fiordiligi (played by Julie) and Dorabella (played by Ruth), to the test. Guglielmo and Ferrando then pretend to be called off to war. They returned disguised as Alabonians and begin to woo the two women. Eventually they are successful in wooing not their real lover, but the other woman.

A similar storyline unfolds in *Cosi*.

### Act 1:

In the first Act, Lewis undertakes to direct a group of patients in the mental institution in a play because “I need the money.” Initially there is some disagreement about what play to put on. Roy, the most enthusiastic (and also one of the most extremely behaved), wants to put on the opera *Cosi Fan Tutte*, despite the fact that no one can read Italian (which the opera is written in) or sing. Lewis is against the idea because it is impractical, and also because of the themes of the opera – “Love is not so important nowadays.” Eventually he agrees to do the opera. However, there are a number of hurdles. Firstly, Doug, a pyromaniac (and the other most extremely behaved patient), sets fire to a toilet and threatens to have the project cancelled. Doug is removed from the show after he lights a second fire outside and Lewis is convinced by Roy to play the part of Ferrando. Lewis also finds it very difficult to direct the patients. Lewis’ more experienced friend Nick, though, is able to direct them more easily. But his arrogance – “Christ, you’ll never be a director until you can convince them that what you want to do is what they want to do” – and his lack of empathy for their views – gets him offside with a number of the patients. Towards the end of the act Lewis begins to find more confidence directing the patients and has begun to develop a friendship with Julie.

### Act 2:

Things seem to be going well at the start of the second act. Rehearsals are well under way and the patients are becoming more involved in the production. During the rehearsal of one scene, the fuse box blows and the theatre is cast in darkness. Lewis and Julie kiss at this moment. In the next scene, Lucy, Lewis’ girlfriend, is contemptuous of the production – “Working with these people has changed you. We used to talk about things. Important things. Now all you can talk about is reactionary drivel like *Cosi Fan Tutte*.” She and Lewis argue and it is revealed that Lucy is having an affair with Nick. Afterwards Lewis confronts Nick and punches him. The production of *Cosi Fan Tutte* goes ahead and is successful. The play ends with a monologue from Lewis that narrates what happens after the play to all the characters.

## The characters

### Lewis:

Lewis is the protagonist of the play. For him, putting on the play with the patients of the mental institution, is very much about going on a journey. Julie remarks in the first act – “In a way you’re sort of testing yourself by coming here?” While Lucy later says in the second act: “Working with these people has changed you. We used to talk about things. Important things. Now all you can talk about is reactionary drivel like *Cosi Fan Tutte*.” To begin with, Lewis lacks confidence, the stage directions describe him as “not knowing what to say,” and

talking “hesitantly” and “uncertainly.” Putting on the play for Lewis is simply motivated by his need for some quick cash. So he wants to put on a play by Brecht – something he is comfortable with and which he thinks has values which are important in “these days...[of]...the Vietnam war.” Lewis initially sees the opera *Così fan tutte* as being trivial – “Love is not so important nowadays.” In this view he is really a follower of Nick and Lucy who are outspoken against the traditional values of society.

Ferrando and Guglielmo test the fidelity of their lovers in the opera *Così fan tutte*. That *Così* parallels this test is very apparent. Lewis ends up playing the part of Ferrando in the production of *Così fan tutte*, and falls for Julie, while it’s revealed that his real girlfriend, Lucy, has been having an affair with Nick. Lewis is attracted to Julie because of her passion – “I’ve always thought that love was being foolish and stupid. It’s about being on the edge and I like being on the edge” – and her belief that love is important.

Lewis doesn’t only change in his views about love. He comes to empathise with the patients of the mental institution. In doing so he is going against ingrained attitudes of the day represented by Nick who sees the people Lewis is working with as “loonies” in a “funny farm.” At the start of the play Lewis was certainly overwhelmed by the personalities he had got himself involved with – “Just leave,” he says to himself – “They’re mad. It’s madness.” But slowly he overcomes the framework of seeing the characters around him as “mad.” “My grandmother went mad,” he tells Julie. “I liked my grandmother, I knew she had gone mad, but she was still my grandmother.” And so he comes to relate to the characters around him, who, though mad, are also just people. He takes a genuine interest in their views and values, and importantly, recognizes that one successful production of a play won’t be the difference in the patients suddenly going from being “mad” to being “normal.” “Happy is the man who calmly takes life as he finds it,” is the last line of *Così fan tutte*. In Lewis’ final monologue to the play, he calmly narrates Julie’s death from an overdose and Roy going “from ward to ward.” There was no miracle happy ending for these characters, and part of Lewis’ journey is to accept this.

What helps Lewis accept the things he does, is that he is able to journey beyond the boundaries of the outside, normal world, into the different world of the mental institution. The setting of a burnt out shell of a theatre, on the boundaries of the mental institution, creates a landscape far away from what Lewis is used to. While other characters from the outside, such as Nick, Lucy and Justin, enter into this world, it is Lewis who fully becomes a part of this world. Julie – who espouses the value that, “That’s what love is, being foolish,” is the link for him. Their kiss, in the dark of the theatre as the fuse box blows, marks Lewis’ complete entry into the world of the mental institution, where he comes to be comfortable with his own identity.

### **Julie:**

Julie’s character is significant in a number of ways. Firstly, her views about love seem to be in direct opposition to Lucy’s. Julie has, “always thought that love

was being foolish and stupid. It's about being on the edge and I like being on the edge." Whereas Lucy sees love as well down the list of priorities in life: "After bread, a shelter, equality, health, procreation, money comes maybe love." However, interestingly, their characters are also similar. Julie says about men and fidelity: "I don't like men's double standards, I guess. Men want women to deceive them because it'll prove their worst thoughts about women..." While Lucy says that men want women to "pretend they're true and faithful" because "that's how they want us to be, even if they're not true and faithful themselves." Julie, in a way, is an altered version of Lucy in the world of the mental institution. She is the character who completely brings Lewis into this new, strange world. Her kiss with him in the dark marks the full transition of Lewis. "I like the dark," Julie says, because it's in the dark that you can be who you really want to be. There is a natural chemistry between Julie and Lewis throughout the play, and as an audience we would like them to have the fairytale ending as a couple – but they don't. As it turns out, Julie has a lesbian partner who she wants to be faithful to because "She's stood by me, through thick and thin, mostly thin."

### **Lucy:**

Lucy is Lewis' girlfriend. The similarity in their names is not co-incidental. It shows how much Lewis' values have been influenced by his girlfriend – "She hates talk about love. She thinks its icky," Lewis says at the start of the play, and his opposition to performing *Cosi Fan Tutte* because of its topic of love reflects Lucy's values. It would be easy to lump both Lucy and Nick in the same basket as characters. But there are important differences. Lucy is less egotistical than Nick and also less judgmental of the mental patients Lewis is working with, though she does ultimately see what Lewis is doing as far less important than either Nick's play or the moratorium. Lucy is also a *catalyst* for change – "make a choice," she says. Lewis needs to decide what he will follow: Lucy's values, or the new value set opening up to him. Nick, on the other hand, is a *measure* of change. His character is used as a contrast against Lewis' to show how far Lewis has come along on his journey.

### **Nick:**

Nick's views, on the surface, are extreme: "Barricades and bombs? Why not?" he says in an interview on the radio about the upcoming moratorium. Beneath his apparent passion for "radicalism" though, there is a motivation of selfishness – "he likes the sound of his voice," Lewis says about him. He is a character who wants to be seen to be doing what is important – to have the attention of doing what is important – rather than actually believing in it. When he says about Lewis and the patients putting on *Cosi Fan Tutte* – "Only mad people in this day and age would do a work about love and infidelity" – the objection isn't to the ideas of love and fidelity, but simply the fact that these values will be *seen* in the production. Nick's superficiality comes across at a number of points – he openly admits that is only helping Lewis so he himself will get something in return ("so you'll help me out on the moratorium committee.") and responds to seeing Julie in the first scene with, "Wow, she's not half bad" (which is only one step away

from Doug's response to seeing Lucy: "Great tits."). Later, he describes his relationship with Lucy as "only sex."

### **Roy:**

It's Roy's idea to put on the production of *Così Fan Tutte*. The opera is important to him, he says, because it would summon up a "world that was as far removed from this depressing asylum as possible. A world that was like my childhood: tea parties, dances in our ballroom, circus performers coming to perform just for me." But none of this is actually true. As Cherry reveals to Lewis towards the end of the play: "He spent most of his early life in orphanages and being farmed out to foster parents who, realizing what a nut case they had on their hands, put him back, quick smart." Roy is delusional – but the delusions are a way of coping, of making sense of things: "Without this opera having been composed, there would be a clanging, banging, a bedlam all around us." He is constantly critical of Lewis, belittling him as a director ("every day after rehearsals he came and complained to me about your direction," says Justin), deriding the relationship between him and Julie ("he's testy because he didn't get a poke!") and at the end of the play giving Lewis a list of "teething problems with your direction...I know that you can take criticism because you must get a lot of it."

### **Henry:**

Henry's views are probably the most conservative of any of the characters in the mental institution. He objects to criticism of the Vietnam war because, "My fffffather fought in the war for you. For you and fffffor me. He was a ggggreat man. You are traitors." He believes in fidelity – but, more thoughtfully, people being true and honest - "This *Così* condones the cccorruption of innocence. Women are told to be tramps. Free love. Women are not to be trusted." Though these opinions are strong, Henry's character is quite subservient to Roy much of the time, taking orders from him. However, through participating in the opera, Henry is able to give a voice to his opinion and it is no coincidence that he plays that part of Don Alfonso in *Così Fan Tutte*, who is the wise old philosopher. Performing in this role Henry has confidence and does not stutter.

### **Justin:**

Justin is the social worker who starts the project. He is a curious character. In the first scene he is not sure at first who is the director and who are the patients of the mental institution. His advice to Lewis at the beginning is an odd mix of "they'll be no trouble" and "whenever this place gets too much for me, I always think of this definition – a madman is someone who arrives at a fancy dress party dressed in the Emperor's new clothes." What this means is lost on Lewis, and Justin soon after goes, leaving the young Lewis in a run down building with faulty wiring and a group of mentally ill people who Lewis has had no experience of. Justin's character seems supportive, but there is no real help he actually gives Lewis. Furthermore, when Lewis comes across his first obstacle – that of Doug (a pyromaniac) setting fire to the toilet - Justin's reaction is to call it all off – "Well,

that's it then...the experiment is over." His character seems to represent some attitudes of neglect towards the mentally ill in the 1970s.

### **Doug:**

Doug is a pyromaniac – a firelighter – both in reality and symbolically. His actions threaten to get the show cancelled in its early stages when he sets fire to a toilet. Doug is the most sexually frank character - asking questions like: "Was Lucy a virgin when you first had her?" and "How many did Lucy have before you?" He comes across as a crass character but his questions serve an important purpose. Like fires, his frank questions tend to spark actions or reactions. They are catalysts for thought. It's Doug who reveals to Lucy that Julie has "gone for" Lewis, which leads to the final confrontation between Lucy and Lewis.

### **Ruth:**

Ruth seems to have an obsessive-compulsive disorder. Her character is concerned with reality – "the more real it is, the more real it is," and "Comedy is better when it's real." Her character reminds us that the process of producing the play within the play is about finding a deeper, or more real, reality.

### **Cherry:**

Cherry represents an interesting mix of feelings and ideas. She has aggressively romantic feelings towards Lewis frankly declaring her passion for him. At the same time she is judgmental of women who are too "easy" – "It's easy to see that Fiordiligi's not like Dorabella, who was a bit of a tart giving in so easily," and "most women fight hard to keep men out of their pants." However, her emotion towards Lewis reveals how love or passion can make us do things we wouldn't normally do. Cherry is also a character who seems to be cut off from the world - "What's this about Vietnam..." she asks at one point, even though the Vietnam war has been going on for nearly ten years.

### **Zac:**

Zac only has a small role in the play, spending a good part of the time drugged or catatonic. However, his character partly reveals Justin's idea that the residents of the mental institution have thought "extraordinary" thoughts. His set design for the play came to him like "a white light pouring into the ward," and it consists of a stark white backdrop that washes away "reality" because "I can't stand real things." Zac is able to see things from a different perspective. While everyone else focuses on Mozart being the "genius" behind *Così fan tutte*, Zac advertises Da Ponte in his poster for the play – Da Ponte was the writer of the words for the opera.

## The themes

### **Fidelity, Commitment and Love:**

The opera *Così fan tutte* which Lewis and the mental patients are performing is a play about love and fidelity. The concerns of the opera are also very real concerns of the characters in *Così*. By performing the opera they can explore their views and values about fidelity and love. Lewis thinks at the start of the play, in agreement with Lucy, that “love is not so important nowadays.” He has talked with Lucy about “free love” and Nick urges him not to let the fact that he is having sex with Lucy to come between them as mates. But it does. Lewis discovers over the course of the play that love is “important” and that commitment and fidelity are also important. For Julie love is about being “foolish” and on the “edge.” It’s this excitement that she likes. Through her Lewis discovers this. However, for Julie, being “foolish” doesn’t necessarily mean being unfaithful as she stays true to her partner in the end and doesn’t have a relationship with Lewis. Other characters, such as Henry, Doug and Cherry, all have strong opinions about love and commitment throughout the play.

### **Transformations and Identity:**

Central to the meaning of the play is the journey that Lewis makes as character who sees love as not important at the start of the play to seeing love as very important at the end. To make this journey Lewis needed to be taken from the context of what he considered ‘normal’ into a different world. The mental institution represents a place that is on the fringes of society – neglected and ignored by the outside world. Into this world Lewis journeys - “testing” himself, as Julie says. Through his kiss with Julie in the darkness of the theatre, Lewis is able to make his final transformation. Part of his transformation is to realize that the characters of the mental institution around him can’t make a miraculous change. Roy doesn’t suddenly become an understanding character in the end, nor does Julie get over her addiction. Lewis, and we as an audience, need to accept these characters for who they are, rather than wanting them to conform to our ideas of what is “normal.”

### **Reality, Confusion and Fantasy:**

To make his journey, Lewis needed to enter a place where reality is confused. For characters such as Zac and Roy, the play, and the mental institution, is about creating an escape from reality - “I can’t stand real things. If I could put up with reality I wouldn’t be in here.” For other characters, such as Julie, the mental institution closes them in, but putting on the play allows them to break free from reality - “I like the dark. That’s what I hate about the wards – they’re never really totally dark.” Through his experiences with these characters Lewis explores what is ‘real’ and what is ‘normal.’ As Roy responds when Lewis says that love isn’t important at the start of the play: “what planet are you from.”

## The symbols

Louis Nowra uses a number of symbols to mark key points in Lewis' journey throughout the play.

- **The darkened, derelict, burnt out theatre at the start of the play:** The neglected, burnt out theatre represents the attitudes that society has to mental health – it's neglected, and the mentally ill are marginalised. It also represents a different world for Lewis that he needs to enter into. A world that is much different to his own and where he will 'test' himself.
- **The flickering fuse box:** The electrics in the theatre are faulty, and throughout the play the lights flicker as the fuse box flickers. This represents Lewis' uncertainty – his lack of confidence about what he is doing.
- **The fire:** Doug lights two fires – the second one gets him taken off the play. The fire represents an initial hurdle for Lewis and the other characters – it's an obstacle that nearly derails the whole play. However, just like real fire, Doug's fire brings with it change and new beginnings. The characters collude with Lewis to come up with a story about the fire to make sure the play keeps going. When Doug departs, Lewis also takes on the part of Ferrando, which draws him deeper into the play.
- **The rain:** At the beginning of the second act it is raining. Rehearsals are going well – the characters are beginning to take more ownership over the play and relate it to their own real-life experiences. Rain represents life, and this is what is happening at this stage in the play. The characters are using the opera to explore their own lives and feelings.
- **Zac's white stage design:** Zac's stage design is a stark white back drop. He says the inspiration was like "Annunciation Light". Light represents knowledge and understanding. In the first part of Act 2 the characters are going deeper into the meaning of *Cosi Fan Tutte* – the stage design represents the understanding that Lewis in particular gains from his participation in the play. This symbol comes just before the dark and the kiss where Lewis comes to see how important love is.
- **The theatre thrown into darkness:** Lewis must fully immerse himself in the world of the mental institution to complete his journey. The darkness represents his journey to a point far away from the outside world. In the darkness he no longer sees the things he normally sees, or thinks the things he normally thinks. He experiences complete change.
- **The kiss:** The kiss between Lewis and Julie is the point where Lewis finally transforms from the character he was at the start of the play, into a character with a deeper understanding of his own identity and values. To



make this final transition, he needs to embrace this new world – the kiss does this.

- **Lewis turning off the lights at the end of the play:** As an audience we like happy endings – we would have liked Julie and Lewis to be a couple in the end, for Roy to become more empathetic to Lewis. These things don't happen. Instead, Lewis narrates, in a very matter of fact way, the death of Julie and Henry, the fact that Roy goes from ward to ward. Lewis's final act is to turn the lights off. This heightens the impact of what he has said, and leaves us with the feeling that what we have seen is a snapshot of a set of lives that didn't all miraculously change in a Hollywood-ending way. Life happened and after the lights go out life will continue to happen. And as the chorus says at the end of *Così fan tutte*, we need to accept this.

## Quotes

Lewis: I need the money, Lucy.

Nick: Mad actors are bad enough, but madmen...

Roy: I was expecting someone a bit older.

Justin:...Bit shy, the old Henry. Part of this project is to bring out people like Henry.

Justin: You must feel a bit queasy. I know I was when I first came to an asylum...

Justin: They are normal people who have done extraordinary things, thought extraordinary thoughts.

Justin:...The important thing is to keep them interested. To bring them out of their shells. Give them something interesting to do.

Justin:...Whenever this place gets too much for me, I always think of this definition – a madman is someone who arrives at a fancy dress party dressed in the Emperor's new clothes.

Roy: It's all in my head. Without this, the world wouldn't be the same.

Roy: About testing how true your true love is.

Lewis: Why can't I ever say no? Just leave. They're mad. It's madness.

Lewis: Do you think we should be doing something like this?...In these days, you know, the Vietnam war –

Lewis:...Love is not so important nowadays.

Roy: What planet are you from?

Roy: ...We'll bring culture to this place.

Roy: Without this opera having been composed, there would be a clanging, banging, a bedlam all around us.

Roy: ...All directors are tyrants.

Lewis:...Free love is a hard concept to define.

Lewis: ...I've heard it all before. Nick's a friend. He has only one problem, he likes the sound of his voice.

Doug: I'm not prying or anything, am I? It's just that in here you miss out on a lot of the changes in society's morals.

Cherry: Typical junkie, needs stimulus all the time or else her thoughts turn to you-know-what.

Justin: Straight out of university and...well, this is probably the best education: doing theatre, working with such people!

Julie: In a way you're sort of testing yourself by coming here?

Lewis: ...She hates talk about love. She thinks its icky. 'Love is the last gasp of the bourgeois romanticism' she says. She hates me doing an opera about love and fidelity while thousands of Vietnamese are being killed by America troops.

Julie: I don't like men's double standards, I guess. Men want women to deceive them because it'll prove their worst thoughts about women...

Julie: My parents had me committed. They think its sort of like a holiday.

Julie:...It's peculiar about drugs. Doug hates them because he likes to be naturally high all the time. Zac likes them because everything passes like he's in a dream or limbo. I think I'm a naturally addictive personality.

Roy: Look on the bright side, Jerry. For killing an actor he'd get life, for killing a director he get eternal gratitude.

Nick: Only mad people in this day and age would do a work about love and infidelity. They're definitely mad.

Nick: Christ, you'll never be a director until you can convince them that what you want to do is what they want to do.

Henry: My fffffather fought in the war for you. For you and ffff for me. He was a ggggreat man. You are traitors.

Henry: This *Cosi* condones the cccorruption of innocence. Women are told to be tramps. Free love. Women are not to be trusted.

Lewis: Henry, it doesn't condone –

Henry: Be quiet. My mother only lloved my fffather, no one else. He died in Kkkoreaa and lloved nnnoneelse but me.

Henry: I fffelt like it.

Ruth: Yes, the more real it is, the more real it is.

Cherry: I thought we would make it more real. The women aren't twits, are they?

Julie:...That's what love is, being foolish.

Julie: I've always thought that love was being foolish and stupid. It's about being on the edge and I like being on the edge.

Roy: ...Hate is a much more pure emotion. We choose our enemies with much greater care than our lovers.

Ruth: Comedy is better when its real.

Zac: I can't stand real things. If I could put up with reality I wouldn't be in here.

Lewis: I want the others to contribute, it makes them feel part of the show.

Roy:...Democracy is foreign to theatre, Jerry. You and I know that, it's just that you want to pander to the mob.

Roy: I had a dream...There would be music...a world that was as far removed from this depressing asylum as possible. A world that was like my childhood...

Julie: I like the dark. That's what I hate about the wards – they're never really totally dark.

Julie: Isn't that the first day of the moratorium.

Lewis: This comes first.

Lucy: Working with these people has changed you. We used to talk about things. Important things. Now all you can talk about is reactionary drivel like *Cosi Fan Tutte*.

Lewis: It's about important things – like love and fidelity.

Lewis: I don't have a concept, I'm a director.

All at the end of Cosi Fan Tutte: Happy is the man who calmly takes life as he finds it and through the vicissitudes of life lets himself be ruled by reason...