Wright was faced with a philosophical challenge and grappled with the idea of history. "What is the meaning of history?" he asks. "Where does the line between the past and the present run?" The line, he argues, is not always clear and it is often the case that history is not a linear progression but a series of events that are interconnected and interrelated.

He was also faced with a technical challenge: how to encompass the fact that "there is no one central black experience of WWII". The answer was to use elements and ideas from many different stories, some closely linked to an individual story and others combined or manipulated to form a different whole. Ultimately, the goal was to put "black faces back into all our history".

**STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS**

**Style and narrative structure**

Black Diggers has two acts, which consist of a series of vignettes that are connected by theme and by the interwoven use of some characters. The rapid-fire transitions between the short, sharp scenes and the obvious historical importance of the ideas and events give the play Brechtian elements. The non-linear narrative time-frame reinforces the deliberate feeling of fragmentation, designed to make us feel "as if the theatre itself is suffering from shellshock".

According to Wesley Enoch (the original director, who wrote the foreword to the text) the play is broken into sixty-four vignettes or units, and then into five parts:

- Pre-Nation: a reflection on the wars and experience of Indigenous Australian people before nationhood
- Enlistment: the process of Indigenous Australian men signing up
- The Theatre of War: the stories from the front as reported in journals, letters, official records and oral history
- The Return: the effects of returning and the expectations of both the men who returned and those they were returning to
- Legacy: what has been left behind for us

The play balances comedic moments with the much darker aspects of war and racism. It also incorporates a range of theatrical devices including masks, the use of song and radio broadcast and the reading of letters and documents.

**Symbols**

- **EVOLUTIONARY RACISM**
  The idea of evolution and the development of humanity is present, and is particularly associated with the character of Nigel. Nigel, the boy who is taken from his home and raised by a white family, reminds us that Aboriginality was regarded as inferior to a non-Aboriginal lifestyle. The juxtaposition of Nigel at the monkey museum with his father, and later with the Tarzan sandwich board is intended to reinforce the notion that for most of the country, Nigel's biological family were little better than animals. Even in the Prisoner of War camp, he is regarded as exotic, his cranium is measured and he is studied, just like those museum pieces he saw as a child.

- **LAND AND THE FIRST FLEET**
  References to land and the First Fleet are used as a symbol of invasion. The importance of belonging to your own land is emphasised and refers to land both at home and abroad. We are reminded of the invasion of Australia by the European settlers, and the invading armies across Europe during the First World War. Grunwald tells Bertie, "We've been fighting for country for a long time" and when Frank dies, Bertie insists that "he can't get buried in this dirt", as his soul won't know where to go home.
THE IRON HARVEST
Specifically mentioned by Ern when he is an old soldier, the Iron Harvest refers to the
bits of shrapnel that rise to the surface from the earth after a conflict. Here, it is meant
to remind us that the deeds and misdeeds from the past cannot be buried, they will
always rise to the surface. Ern himself picks a piece of shrapnel – of his carefully buried
history – out of his skin, decades after the war.

LETTERS, PAPERS AND THE PROTECTOR
Throughout the play, characters read extracts from letters and other papers that
represent the colonial bureaucracy that surrounded Indigenous Australian life before
and after the war. Often the references to ‘The Protector’ indicate a kind of paternal
figure who doles out money and looks after Indigenous Australian people as if they are
children. At other times, The Protector has an even more sinister aspect. The fact that
many of the letters are either begging for entitlements or setting out appeal cases to
higher authorities reinforces this impression.

The laws regarding Indigenous Australians make little or no sense. The fact that
neither the clerk, the secretary nor the corporal have any idea what ‘Substantially
European’ actually means highlights the ambiguity of the nation’s approach to
Indigenous Australians.

TEXTUAL ELEMENTS
Characters
The characters in Black Diggers offer a broad range of voices about the experience of
Indigenous Australian soldiers. Based on the stories of real-life people, they represent
an array of varied insights. The characters serve to represent the voices of people and
experiences that might have been lost to time.

Cast of Black Diggers Drama Theatre, Sydney Opera House (2014)