

Children of the Black Skirt

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A Project History

In September 2001 Real TV (Angela Betzien, Pete Goodwin and myself) was approached by Queensland Arts Council (QAC) and asked to create a new work for young people. QAC had been attracted to Real TV because of our reputation for creating theatrically exciting and accessible, political plays. Our brief was to create a challenging work for upper primary and high school, which addressed the curriculum.

This invitation was a great honour for Real TV. QAC recognised the importance of collaborating with artistic teams, breaking with the traditional commissioning model of working solely with a writer. The brief was also very appealing to Real TV because the possibilities for the work were endless.

It was late one evening, at the back of the Cement Box Theatre where Real TV was presenting its fourth work (*Princess of Suburbia*) that the idea emerged to explore the topic of orphanages. Angela had had some early experiences with orphanages in her childhood, having attended a number of religious education camps at an old orphanage outside her hometown. Everyone was excited by the potential of this subject matter in terms of its political issues and theatrical possibilities.

From that night onwards, Real TV began a rigorous campaign planning the project and researching the subject matter. The team also started brainstorming different non-naturalistic styles of performance that could be used to tell what was panning out to be a very dark and Gothic piece of theatre. It was envisaged that two creative development phases throughout 2002 would be required for this work to take shape.

The Real TV team and actors Laurel Collins, Jodie Le Vesconte and Kyas Sherriff embarked on a week-long expedition to Central Queensland. We spent a day at the orphanage Angela had visited as a child. This experience gave everyone the chance to experience the area's unique aural, physical, cultural and historical landscape.

There were also very long and intensive discussions about the history of Australia, the treatment of Indigenous people since invasion, the link between institutionalisation and cultural genocide and the culture of silence and cover-up by government agencies and religious institutions. The outcome of this process was the development of a strong ensemble of artists; a common understanding about the project, its themes and vision; and a wealth of sense memory experiences from which the actors could draw. The major dramatic question for the work emerged: how does the treatment of children reflect our society and shape future generations?

Between April and July, Angela wrote the first draft. We soon realised the work was too dark for young audiences. We faced a major dilemma: how do we tell stories about the most painful cases of child abuse in a play that is appropriate for young audiences?

Real TV, plus designer Tanja Beer and the original three actors spent two weeks working on the first draft of the script. This phase gave everyone the opportunity to work out the logistics of the script, its structure, narratives, characters and theatrical demands. At this point we realised that by drawing on fairytale traditions and styles we could communicate dark subject matter metaphorically.

An audience of high school students, industry and the general public were invited to view this work in progress and respond through feedback forms. Much of this feedback was extremely positive and these responses formed the basis for Angela's subsequent draft of the script in preparation for production.

By February 2003, Angela had completed a production draft of the script for the first tour of *Children of the Black Skirt*. The show was rehearsed over the course of nine days. The biggest challenge of this process was in defining the conventions of the work. For example, the sheets became an integral part of the spirit sequences, creating character and context for these stories as well signifying the release of the spirits at the end of each account. Another stumbling block was how to transform the Black Skirt into Harrold Horrocks in front of the audience.

The actors returned from the first tour of Queensland loaded with feedback from teachers and students. A redraft of the script took

place in time for the tour in 2004. A new final story was added, that of the Black Skirt's baby, which clarified much of the mystery surrounding the character.

Over the last two years of touring, we have received some wonderful responses from young people and teachers about the play. Many have told us that *Children of the Black Skirt* is the best piece of theatre they've ever seen. This is a heartening affirmation that disputes the cynical perception of young people as politically and socially apathetic. Young audiences have also been stunned into silence by the ominous Black Skirt. They have expressed their genuine fear of this character whose presence is created without special effects, through the superb physical skills of the actor. As theatre makers who believe wholeheartedly in the power of this medium, this is more than enough encouragement to continue to create engaging theatre for young people.

In the meantime Real TV hopes that *Children of the Black Skirt* will haunt and enchant people across Australia and, one day, around the world, for years to come.

Leticia Cáceres
(Director, premiere Real TV production)
January 2005

Composer's Notes

For the original touring production I drew inspiration for the musical score from the records my family owned when I was a child. These included old recordings of Australian colonial folk songs that my dad bought in his 20s prior to being married, as well as classic children's records including Patsy Biscoe, songs from Sesame Street, and the Walt Disney Little Golden Book series. The scratchiness and crackle reminiscent of these records was deliberately kept in the soundtrack to evoke a sense of nostalgia.

In a manner much more akin to film than theatre, a complex layer of sound and sound effects was added to the music to help create the foreboding presence of the orphanage itself, as well as the unique, eerie mood of the Australian landscape. The sound of the spirits of dead children who come to haunt the orphanage at night were created from sampling the actors' voices into a computer and electronically manipulating the pitch and timbre of their voices to sound like children.

In performance, the music and sound were operated by the three actors from a minidisc player concealed backstage.

*Pete Goodwin
(Composer, premiere Real TV production)*



*Above: Setting up.
Below: The touring set.*



Setting

Children of the Black Skirt was written specifically for schools touring and therefore the set was designed very simply to ensure it was transportable and easily assembled by three actors in any classroom context.

Major set and prop items include the following:

- Two small wooden dormitory beds
- Twelve sheets
- Two pillows
- Two wooden boxes
- A calico backdrop with a gauze window
- A wire clothesline
- A washing basket
- A small suitcase (inside the suitcase is an item of underwear, a teddy bear, a book of fairytales)
- Several wooden 'Dolly' pegs (including those used to create The Black Skirt and Harrold Horrocks puppets)
- A teacup and saucer and a serving tray
- A scrubbing brush
- A set of keys
- A large pair of scissors
- A sound system
- Five costumes (New One, Old One, The Black Skirt, Harrold Horrocks and Rosie)

The intention is that actors will utilise the basic set items of sheets, pegs and pillows in multiple ways to create character and context. For example, sheets might be hung to create the appearance of a forest in Maggie's story, or a pillow used to play the baby in Lizzie's story.

In the original production of the play, the sheets were used to symbolise the spirits. The spirits are 'released' from their orphanage world when the sheet is flung out into the air.

Production Notes

The play was originally intended for performance by three female actors playing multiple roles, however it is also suited to a larger ensemble of actors. An entire class could be enrolled as orphanage children and the multiple roles distributed among the group. Although the play has been performed by a cast of three females, the work could easily be adapted for an all-male or a gender-mixed cast.

In many cases, stage directions have not been prescribed, however, whenever possible actors should physicalise the action in the stories. There is also flexibility within the text to creatively explore the various 'orphanage sequences'. For example, 'morning dormitory routines' or 'work routines' can be choreographed sequences that might employ the ensemble's dance and/or physical performance skills. Similarly, there is also opportunity to create live soundscapes instead of pre-recording.

The sequence in which the letters of the orphanage children are recited could be extended to include letters that students have written themselves. Similarly, students might like to write or improvise the story of a present day spirit. This will encourage young people to consider the contemporary relevance of the historical themes and issues in the play.

Transformation of character

The text requires the actor to transform characters. In the touring production of the play, these transformations always occurred in front of the audience. In accordance with Brechtian alienation techniques this theatrical convention is employed to challenge naturalistic modes of performance and engage audiences with the politics of character.

If the text is performed by three actors, doubling of the main characters is also required. For example, New One/Rosie and The Black Skirt/ Harrold Horrocks. These transformations provide a challenge to the creative team and should be solved with theatricality and imagination.