

Children  
of the Black Skirt

Angela Betzien



Currency Press, Sydney

## 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.



# **Teachers' Notes**

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## INTRODUCTION

In the past ten years there has been increasing attention placed upon the treatment of children in the past and present, both here in Australia and internationally. The media has played an instrumental role in influencing and reflecting public opinion about the rights of the child and the role that adults play in protecting the young. Young people today need to consider how children have been treated in the past by institutions, government policies, and the community. It is important that students have an understanding of human rights issues so that they may reflect upon issues of access to power and rights and responsibilities in their own community and advocate for the protection of those rights.

Students should reflect upon the past and pose their own questions, and then transform knowledge into action. After investigations of their own, they should be able to communicate their findings and proposals, suggesting possible solutions to alleviate injustice.

These notes encourage Inquiry-based learning and Aesthetic learning to investigate an issue that really matters, requiring students to frame questions, consult a range of sources, and present their findings in a manner appropriate to audience and purpose. In order to accomplish this, teachers must adopt an inquiring frame of mind in their classroom and allow space for students to ask their own questions. Young people need to have opportunities to transform their knowledge of Social Justice through significant demonstrations.

## BACKGROUND TO THE PLAY'S DEVELOPMENT

Real TV's vision is to produce new theatrical works that are innovative, physical and political. 'We attempt to interpret and articulate the dispossession, alienation and desperation of society, to tell the true stories of the underclass, stories that appear in few seconds' slots on the six o'clock news.' The artistic team consists of Angela Betzien (Writer), Leticia Cáceres (Director), Pete Goodwin (Composer), Tanja Bear (Designer) and Jodi Le Vesconte (Actor).

*Children of the Black Skirt* started its creative development as *The Orphanage Project*. It received support from Arts Queensland and

Queensland Arts Council to research orphanages. The second phase of creative development was supported by the Australia Council and Brisbane Powerhouse. The extended version of the *The Orphanage Project* script was programmed in 2003 at Queensland Theatre Company.

## **SUMMARY OF THE STORY**

This story takes place in a mythical, timeless Australian orphanage. Two orphan children, Old One and New One, always wary of The Black Skirt (the cruel Governess who floats up and down the dormitory corridors, dangerously wielding her enormous scissors), tell terrible tales of other poor lost children to escape the reality of their own lives. The play delves into the history of Australia through the eyes of children, from convict times to early white occupation, to the vast era of the Stolen Generation to World War Two and beyond. Three actors create a highly theatrical, physical and visually spectacular gothic fairytale, as they slip in and out of different characters to tell us the tales of children from Australia's past.

## **THEMES, IDEAS AND PREOCCUPATIONS OF THE PLAY**

- Transportation in early colonial Australia
- The lost child in Australian history
- The plight of orphans in Australia
- Abandonment
- Poverty and its effect on children
- The Stolen Generation
- Children being used as servants
- Child migration

## **HISTORICAL CONNECTIONS**

- Colonial Australia
- Penal transportation
- The Depression
- The Stolen Generation
- Post-war immigration

## PERFORMANCE STYLE OF THE PLAY

*Children of the Black Skirt* is a non-naturalistic piece of theatre recounting impressions left within the Australian consciousness concerning lost children. The piece benefits from abstracted or heightened movement and gesture to create a strong physical performance language. *Children of the Black Skirt* continues the gothic tradition and has its contemporary roots in Junk Opera (Shock Peter). The soundtrack is an integral part of the performance piece operating cinematically, like a film-score, to support and extend the dramatic action. Whilst the thematic territory explores the reality of child suffering in Australian orphanages, the piece has strong 'fairytale' imagery. Similarly, the use of nursery rhymes and rhymes underpin key ideas. The piece is strong in poetic symbolism making it suitable for the use of puppetry and shadow play.

## DISCUSSION POINTS

The following points and sample questions can be used as a framework to stimulate inquiry into issues raised by the play *Children of the Black Skirt*:

### 1) Tuning In

- What is power? In what ways may power be used/displayed?
- What are human rights?
- What are responsibilities?
- What is power in art? What is power in history?

### 2) Preparing to Find Out

- What do we know about the experiences of children in the play and what do we want to find out?
- How do we investigate the experiences of children in Australia?

### 3) Finding Out

- What have been the experiences of abandoned, lost and stolen children in Australia?
- How have these stories been presented in different forms (art, historical sources)?
- Why did these experiences occur?
- What are the consequences of these experiences?

#### **4) Sorting Out**

What issues of power exist within the play and other stories and sources we have investigated?

Why have the experiences of children been presented in different ways?

How do we compare the power of art to tell us stories about orphans and the power of history to tell us stories about orphans?

#### **5) Going Further**

What elements of drama and dramatic conventions allow the experiences of children to be shared?

What attitudes towards children's rights are advocated in Australia and how can I advocate/prioritise these human rights issues?

What are society's responsibilities towards children?

What issues of power are involved?

#### **6) Making Connections**

How have my views on the lives of children changed?

Who are the future orphans of the world?

What is the relationship between power, rights and responsibilities?

#### **7) Taking Action**

What have I learnt about children's rights and the power over children?

What have I learnt about the craft of artistry and history to tell powerful stories?

How is power connected to truth?

How can I take action to express my ideas?

For what purpose can I take action?

How can we ensure that humans have access to power and yet ensure that power is not abused?

### **RESPONSIVE ACTIVITIES TO THE PLAY**

Responding may take many forms. It is important that educators identify the nature of the knowledge gained from a work of art and encourage students to 'respond' to it by writing a review or by participating in discussion. These are valuable ways in which to respond, however students may also respond to a work of art by 'forming' and 'presenting' responses via poetry, drama, visual arts, PowerPoint, chat

room correspondence, dance and so on. We often transform experiences into new experiences symbolically or metaphorically.

The aim and objective of these activities is to provide contexts for students to explore the themes and styles in the play and to allow them to reflect and define what childhood means to them.

## **ACTIVITY 1: THE WORLD OF THE CHARACTERS**

### **Exercise A: Warm Up**

Place the following rhyme on an overhead projector for students to read and recite in a circle. Add movement or gesture to emphasise meaning.

‘Australia is a free land,  
Free without a doubt,  
If you haven’t got a dinner,  
You’re free to go without.’

### **Exercise B: Character Sculptures**

Students in pairs create two different sculptures that capture a character from the play that is most memorable for them. One student sculpts the other into their representation of the character. Share and deconstruct.

The main characters and storylines to consider are:

A chorus of nameless orphans

Old One

New One

Rosie (the laundry woman)

The Black Skirt

The cockney English boy, John

Lizzie (from Glasglow)

Mr Harold Horrocks (Inspector of Orphanages)

Maggie/family (the lost child scenario)

Lucy (the child servant)

The family who can’t pay the rent and lose their house to a fire

The children who lose their father in the war and are sent to Australia

The children who eat the jam sandwiches and are taken from their mother

## **Exercise C: Character Building**

Students in groups decide on one character and draw a large outline of the character on butcher's paper. On the inside of the drawing, the group writes key lines or feelings about the character. On the outside, the group writes key questions about the character. Ask the students to consider what the missing facts about the character are and devise an improvisation that supplies some missing information about that character. Improvisations could investigate the following situations:

- A scene that reveals details about the character before the context of the play.
- A scene that reveals a situation that could run alongside the play. (For example, a mother discussing with a friend or other family member the decision to send her child to an orphanage.)
- A scene that reveals what happens to a character after the play. (For example, what happens to Old One and New One or Lizzie the girl from Glasgow?)
- Present and discuss.

## **ACTIVITY 2: ABSTRACTION**

Playwright Angela Betzien often asks actors to 'abstract' a piece of dramatic action. Students may explore this stylistic device using scenarios from the play. Experiment with the following process:

a) Students select an element – air, fire, water, earth or rain – and move around the room physicalising an aspect of that element. Students should initially concentrate on one part of the body and gradually let the whole body become that element. Add sound effects and play.

b) Students form groups and select one of the following scenarios from the play:

1. A parent at dinner telling the family he/she has lost their job.
2. A group of young orphans comforting each other in the middle of the night.
3. A young person being caught stealing or pickpocketing.
4. A group of children, migrating to Australia on a boat, looking at the Australian coastline.

Students realistically create a small scene that captures this situation. Once they have the scene complete all groups present to the class.

c) Each person then reconsiders the element they were playing with. They now add the essence of the element to their character. Some students may want to change their element to suit their character. The character becomes the element. Groups rehearse. Students are to exaggerate and overdo their element and see the effect. The scene is to look totally unrealistic. Present.

d) Students reflect on abstracting their characters by adding a small aspect of an element that is symbolic of their character. How can they layer in a movement or gesture that helps to create meaning in their performance? Do they add a slight tremor to an arm movement? How can they move their presentation from realism to a more stylised abstracted interpretation? Groups present.

e) Class to discuss the effects of abstraction in their own work and the way actors may approach the characters in *Children of the Black Skirt*.

### **ACTIVITY 3: EPITAPHS AND OBITUARIES**

Students are to write an epitaph or obituary for the lost children in Australia. The class decides on minority groups that they might wish to focus on – children lost in the outback, the Stolen Generation, children lost during transportation.

### **ACTIVITY 4: WHAT IS A CHILD?**

This extended activity allows students to anticipate and explore the key themes and style of *Children of the Black Skirt* and to investigate the key question ‘What is a child?’ These exercises are designed to cue students into the artform of the play and deepen the experience of reading the script or viewing a performance.

#### **Exercise A: Warm up**

Students are given the following line adapted from the opening scene, which they must memorise:

‘Youse wanna story, one a them spirit stories?’

This is a story ‘bout a lil’ one come from far away.’

- a) In pairs, students recite and repeat the line in turns to their partner as they walk around the room. Students should play with the vocalisation of the line and the acting style used.



- b) Students then devise an ending to the line, 'I come from...' (Teacher to coach from the side that the line must reveal different places where children who live in Australia come from.)
- c) Students rehearse the 'I come from...' lines with their created endings, then, in turn, present to the class.

### **Exercise B: Childhood**

In groups, students design storyboards that chart images of children from colonial times through to now as depicted in the play. Teacher-led discussion should explore the following questions:

- What is a child?
- What age has been regarded as childhood throughout the ages?
- How have children been treated throughout the ages?
- What historical and economical conditions have affected the treatment of children?
- When would you have least liked to have been a child?
- Where and when have children been mistreated?
- How have attitudes to children changed?

Students reflect on the changing nature of childhood. The storyboards devised must cover at least four different eras and have a one-word title. Share.

### **Exercise C: Your Own Childhood**

- 1) Students to improvise around the following theme: Imagine you are returning, after an absence, to your childhood bedroom as it was when you were seven or eight. Pretend you have travelled a long way before you open the door. Teacher narration from the side: 'How do you enter your old bedroom? What do you rediscover? Nothing has changed, each object is still in its place. You find all your old toys, your furniture, and your bed. The images from the past come alive again. Pick something from the room that captures what childhood means to you and take it back out the door with you.'
- 2) Students then all sit in a circle and in turn describe the object they have brought back from their childhood room. Debrief and discuss.
- 3) Teacher poses the question to the class, 'What is a child?' In groups students create a group sculpture which expresses a particular aspect of what childhood means to them and give it a title. Present. This is not a literal presentation.

### **Exercise D: Other Children**

In groups students choose a picture from a magazine or newspaper that includes an image of a child. The group recreates the picture, each student assuming the position of someone or something in the picture. Encourage students to take on non-human parts of the pictures, eg. trees etc., to encourage non-realism. Each student generates 3-4 lines, which make it clear where he or she is and how he or she feels. Present and discuss.

### **ACTIVITY 5: POWER**

In the following exercises students are provided with opportunities to become engaged with the topic, by ascertaining their initial curiosity about the topic, and then being allowed space to share and discuss their personal experience of the topic.

Focus questions:

What is power? In what ways may power be used/displayed?

What are human rights?

What are responsibilities?

What is power in art? What is power in history?

As a teaching consideration, it is suggested that students are given opportunity to record in their own 'think books' questions they have, thoughts they have, and feelings that emerge. It is also recommended that students be given access to a 'graffiti board' in the classroom where they can contribute feelings, thoughts and questions which emerge as a result of class activities.

### **Exercise A: Warm Up**

Pied Piper Power – The teacher takes on the role of the almighty powerful Pied Piper who holds in his/her hands the most potent power of the universe (the Piper's hands and arms begin to shake with the awesome power and he/she begins to hum, slowly making it louder and louder).

Meanwhile the students who have been seated in a circle begin to hum also. The Pied Piper explains that he/she is going to send the power to other pipers, but warns that those pipers seated either side of the one holding the POWER will be shrivelled if they don't protect themselves by raising their hand and placing it on the cheek nearest to the person holding the POWER.

The POWER is passed by throwing it with great force to another whilst calling out their name. Noises accompany the passing of the power, such as *room ro shhoom*. Every time someone is shrivelled, he/she leaves the circle. The winners are the last two pipers.

### **Exercise B: Control**

Discuss the following questions in relation to the play *Children of the Black Skirt*:

- Who was the one really in control during the story?
- Did this change as the story continued?
- What was it that allowed them to have control? (eg. conditions at the time, special powers, certain rights, particular responsibility?)
- Was this element of control used positively or negatively?
- Were the consequences positive or negative? How far reaching were these consequences?
- In what ways could these consequences have been managed or reduced?
- In what ways could this element of control have been minimised?
- In what ways does this element of control relate to concepts of power?

### **Exercise C: Definitions of Power I**

Discuss 'Definitions of Power'. Some of the following definitions may be useful:

'Power is the capacity of individuals or institutions to achieve goals even if opposed by others.'

'Power may be defined as the production of intended effects.'

'Power is the ability to employ force.'

'For the assertion "A has power over B", we can substitute the assertion "A's behaviour causes B's behaviour".'

'My intuitive idea of power is something like this: A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do.'

Power is 'the ability to satisfy one's wants through the control of preferences and/or opportunities.'

Power 'is the process of affecting policies of others with the help of (actual or threatened) severe deprivations for nonconformity with the policies intended.'

‘Power is the ability to cause or prevent change.’

We can see that power has a few key characteristics:

- Power is relational; it requires at least two people or groups to carry it out;
- It depends on one’s position in a social structure, so that power is allocated to individuals or groups depending on their structural location;
- It includes the ability to compel someone or a group of people to do what they otherwise might not, to convince others of the rightness of one’s world view or plan of action, to will one’s vision of the world into being, or to resist these things;
- And finally, it includes some measure of success – the successful exercise of power requires that one be successful in their plan of action.

Engage the students in discussion concerning how power is displayed in *Children of the Black Skirt*. Questions could include:

- Where were there examples of power in the story?
- In what ways were the definitions of power exhibited in the story?
- Was the power shared, transferred, commandeered, stolen? In what ways did this occur? To whom? With what effect?

### **Exercise D: Definitions of Power II**

This exercise follows the discussions in Activity C above.

In pairs or small groups, students take on one of the definitions of power and create an improvisation which reflects that definition.

Before presenting to the class, the students should briefly explain the definition in their own words.

Class discussion should then centre around the differences between the definitions.

This activity is completed with students writing their own definition of ‘power’ which they record in notebooks.

### **Exercise E: Power Plays**

Divide the class into pairs and allocate each pair a specific context for an improvised drama (eg. working in a laboratory, working in a hair salon, packing the car for a picnic). Then secretly give each student a specific aim that they have to achieve in their scene. An example could be:

- Context – Two scientists working in a laboratory.
- A: To get B to leave the room.
- B: To get A to allow B to participate in the new experiment.

Each student's aim should not be told to anyone else. The students are instructed to play their aim during the improvisation.

After each pair has played their scene, ask the audience to identify each person's aim. Engage the class in discussion:

- What ways did each person use to achieve their aim?
- To what extent was each person successful?
- How did each person use power to achieve their aim?
- Could they have achieved their aim in alternative ways?

### Exercise F: Power Styles I

Introduce the concept of 'Power Styles' and discuss the various styles listed below, encouraging students to find examples of each:

**Power Over (Hierarchic Style)** Driven by status, elitism and entitlement. Will use fear and intimidation to achieve objectives.

**Power Through (Competitive Style)** Driven by systems, rules and competitiveness. Will use hard data and regulations to achieve objectives.

**Power With (Collaborative Style)** Driven by broad participation and shared decision-making. Will use negotiation and open confrontation to achieve objectives.

**Power Against (Oppositional Style)** Driven by a need to overthrow real or perceived oppressors. Will use chaos and subtle or overt sabotage to achieve objectives.

**Power Created (Empathic Style)** Driven by compassion and tolerance. Will use self-sacrifice and empathy to achieve objectives.

Each of these unique power styles uses control, decision-making, relationships, language and behaviours to achieve, influence or prevent the completion or attainment of desired goals.

Build upon the previous exercises by engaging students in discussion concerning power styles and how they are displayed in *Children of the Black Skirt*. Questions could include:

- What type of power styles are exhibited in the play?
- What evidence do you have to support your view?

## Exercise G: Power Styles II

In pairs or small groups, students take on one of the power styles from the previous discussion and create an improvisation which demonstrates that style. Students are to consider:

- Gestures
- Body language
- Sounds
- Language used
- Use of space

Students present the scene and, following the performance, the class engages in an analysis of the improvisation. Questions could involve:

- Who had the power in the scene? For what purpose was it used? Was it negative or positive?
- How does language and sound reflect power?
- What gestures and body language were used to reflect power?
- Did the use of space influence power?
- Was there anyone in the scene without power? With less power? How did you know?
- Did the person without power or with less power allow it to happen? Could this person have used power themselves? In what way?

## Exercise H: Role of Power

The word *power* has had a bad connotation for many years. It has received this reputation because most people associate the word with one side dominating or overpowering the other. Power can be defined as ‘the ability to influence people or situations’. With this definition, power is neither good nor bad. It is the abuse of power that is bad.

Introduce ‘The Role of Power’ and discuss types of power and rules of power (see below).

### Types of Power

Various types of power *can* influence outcomes. The word ‘can’ is emphasised because if you have power but don’t use it, your power is of no value. Consider the following types of power and look for examples of each:

1. *Position*. Some measure of power is conferred based on one’s formal position.

2. *Knowledge or expertise.* Knowledge in itself is not powerful; it is the application of knowledge that confers power.
3. *Character.* Individuals who are seen as trustworthy have power. They are perceived as trustworthy if they have a reputation for doing what they say they are going to do.
4. *Reward and punishment.* Those who are able to bestow rewards or perceived rewards hold power. Conversely, those who have the ability to create a negative outcome for the other party also have power.
5. *Behaviour style.* The most appropriate behavioural style is dependent on the situation. For example, if you are going through a divorce and want to maintain a good relationship with your spouse, you would use a supportive style. You gain real power from a knowledge of behaviour styles only if you can read a situation and adapt your style to it.

## Rules of Power

Knowing the following rules of power comes in handy when entering into some form of negotiation with another person.

Rule #1: *Seldom does one side have all the power.*

Rule #2: *Power may be real or apparent.*

Rule #3: *Power exists only as long as it is accepted.*

Rule #4: *Power relationships can change over time.*

Rule #5: *In relationships, the side with the least commitment generally holds the most power.*

## Exercise I

In small groups, students take on one of the types and rules of power and create an improvisation which demonstrates the type/rule. Make certain there is a distribution of types/rules to cover as much of the list as possible. Students present their scenes and, following each performance, the class analyses the improvisation. Questions could involve:

- How did one's position invoke power? What is the connection with the elements of tension and mood?
- How was knowledge used to invoke power? What types of knowledge were used?
- How did the person's character demonstrate power? For what purpose?

- How did the ability to distribute rewards and punishments imply power? How did this create tension?
- What behaviour exhibited/initiated power?
- Did one person have all the power? Was the power real or apparent?
- To what extent did the power exist only because it was allowed to exist?
- Did the power relationships change at all? In what way?

## **ACTIVITY 6: YOUR RIGHTS**

Set up the room for a Commission of Inquiry into the orphanage in which *Children of the Black Skirt* is set. Students take on the roles of characters from the play as well as the Inquiry investigators.

The Commission should be set up formally with the aim of reaching arbitration between the authorities and the children who lived in the orphanage. In setting up the drama, consideration should be given to:

- the contributions of children to the family unit, including their rights, roles and responsibilities
- the children's contributions to orphanage life, including their rights, roles and responsibilities
- parents' contributions to the family unit, including their rights, roles and responsibilities
- the contributions of the authority figures from the play, including their rights, roles and responsibilities
- notions of what a family may be (nuclear, one parent, extended and so on)

The Inquiry should also make direct reference to some or all of the extracts from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990) (see below).

### **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)**

- Article 3 – 'Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.'
- Article 4 – 'No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.'
- Article 5 – 'No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.'



- Article 9 – ‘No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile.’
- Article 13 – ‘Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.’

### **United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child (1990)**

- Article 3 – ‘Parties undertake to ensure the child such protection and care as is necessary for his or her well being, taking into account the rights and duties of his or her parents, legal guardians, or other individuals legally responsible for him or her.’
- Article 9 – ‘Parties shall ensure that a child shall not be separated from his or her parents against their will, except when competent authorities subject to judicial review determine, in accordance with applicable law and procedures, that such separation is necessary for the best interests of the child.’
- Article 11 – ‘Parties shall take measures to combat the illicit transfer and non-return of children abroad.’
- Article 20 – ‘A child temporarily or permanently deprived of his or her family environment, or in whose own best interests cannot be allowed to remain in that environment, shall be entitled to special protection and assistance provided by the State.’

Following the drama, reflect upon the action and allow for debriefing. Questions could include:

- What are human rights?
- Is every person entitled to basic human rights?
- What does it mean to guarantee rights in a convention?
- Should rights be guaranteed?
- Should rights be explicitly listed?
- How do you ensure that rights are respected?
- Do all people have a responsibility to ensure rights are respected?
- What is the connection between human rights and responsibilities?
- What power is needed to ensure that rights are respected?
- What power is needed to ensure that responsibilities are respected?

## **ACTIVITY 7: FINDING OUT ABOUT THE PAST**

Students should be introduced to the following statements that have been made about the nature of art and the artist and history and the historian.

### **The Power of the Artist**

‘It is the function of the artist to evoke the experience of surprised recognition: to show the viewer what he knows but does not know that he knows.’ (William S. Burroughs)

‘Art is the stored honey of the human soul, gathered on wings of misery and travail.’ (Theodore Dreiser)

‘Art is a lie which makes us realise the truth.’ (Pablo Picasso)

‘The function of the artist is to disturb. His duty is to arouse the sleeper, to shake the complacent pillars of the world. He reminds the world of its dark ancestry, shows the world at its present, and points the way to its new birth. He makes uneasy the static, the set and the still.’ (Donald Brittain)

‘Faith is a way of seeing. And the function of the artist is to teach us how to see differently...’ (Rev. Kent Miller)

‘What was any art but a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shining elusive element which is life itself – life hurrying past us and running away, too strong to stop, too sweet to lose.’ (Willa Cather)

‘The function of the artist is to make the transcendent visible; to touch the soul in ways that match the soul; to enshrine beauty so that we may learn to see it; and to make where we live places of wonder.’ (Joan Chittister)

### **The Power of the Historian**

‘History is something that never happened told by someone who wasn’t there.’ (Gomez de la Serna)

‘The historian does simply not come in to replenish the gaps of memory. He constantly challenges even those memories that have survived intact.’ (Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi)

‘History is a myth we all agree to believe.’ (Napoleon)

‘One must always maintain one’s connection to the past and yet ceaselessly pull away from it. To remain in touch with the

past requires a love of memory. To remain in touch with the past requires a constant imaginative effort.’ (Gaston Bachelard)  
‘Any good history begins in strangeness. The past should not be comfortable. The past should not be a familiar echo of the present, for if it is familiar why revisit it? The past should be so strange that you wonder how you and people you know and love could come from such a time.’ (Richard White)

‘History is the witness that testifies to the passing of time; it illuminates reality, vitalises memory, provides guidance in daily life, and brings us tidings of antiquity.’ (Marcus T. Cicero)

‘The historian looks backward. In the end he also believes backward.’ (Friedrich Nietzsche)

‘In lifting the bonds of time and place, in freeing us from the tyranny of the present, history gives greater freedom and becomes the instrument enhancing liberty. Of all learned endeavours, the study of the past can be the most exciting, humanising, broadening – and hence the most liberating.’ (Stephen Vaughn)

### **Exercise A: Responses**

Discuss the meaning of each of the statements and what emotions they provoke.

The class then breaks into groups and each group prepares a short dramatic presentation (using words and physical action) which embodies the essence of one of the quotes.

A debriefing is then held to analyse the work. Questions should include:

- How were the emotional responses to the statements conveyed in performance?
- Did the performers find performance helped to bring out the emotional responses?
- What issues/questions emerged from the performances?
- How are these related to power, rights and responsibilities?

### **Exercise B: Discussion of Children’s Rights**

Ask the students:

- What issues concerning children’s rights are occurring today? In our community? In the state? In our country? In the world?
- What issues concerning children’s rights have occurred in our history?

- How are issues of power, human rights and responsibilities and the experiences of children connected?

Use the following headings below to brainstorm, as a class, and compile a data chart. Reflect upon the value of this exercise in helping clarify and resolve issues.

- Place
- Issue
- People Involved
- Possible Solutions
- Possible Consequences

### **Exercise C: Discussion of the Role of the Artist and the Historian**

Brainstorm, as a class, possible sources from where the above information could be obtained. This could be recorded as a list or concept map. Then reflect upon each item to decide what information could be used by artists and historians respectively. Class discussion could also centre upon the nature of each source of information:

- How is the information presented in this source?
- Who decides how the information is presented?
- What does this say about how information/knowledge is valued?
- How do we decide if this source is reliable and accurate?
- Does this source present a certain viewpoint?
- What 'gaps and silences' could be contained within each source?
- What does this say about the problematic nature of sources?
- What does this say about the nature of knowledge?
- What are the responsibilities, if any, of the artist and historian in telling stories about our past?

### **ACTIVITY 8: FURTHER REFLECTIONS ON THE PLAY**

Students in pairs retell the story of the play *Children of the Black Skirt*. They record key moments and turning points.

What sections surprised you or captivated you?

Which story most stayed with you after the play?

What does the play question? What questions does the play leave unanswered?

The play uses a variety of non-realistic devices. Make a list.

How are objects used to transform or tell stories?

The actors all play multiple roles, what devices can they use in the creation of roles?

Why does the play use nursery rhymes? What effect do they have?

Sound is used throughout the production to create meaning. Describe some of the sound effects and how they could be created.

### **ACTIVITY 9: IMAGES**

In pairs or small groups, ask students to devise one of the following for the play, bearing in mind the style of theatre as well as the story, characters and setting:

- a publicity poster
- a stage set
- some costumes

### **ACTIVITY 10: IDEAS IN REVIEW**

Set up a series of television interview improvisations in which one student, in role as an interviewer, interviews another who is in role as a member of the creative team behind *Children of the Black Skirt*. These roles may include the playwright, director, set designer, sound effects creator, costume designer, actor.

The interviewers should be encouraged to discuss the content of the play, its themes, style and research methods rather than simply a recounting of the story.

### **ACTIVITY 11: EXTENDED PROJECT ON CHILDREN'S RIGHTS**

Individually or in small groups, students can devise a campaign for a particular audience which identifies a particular problem connected with children's rights, present ways to ensure that these rights are protected, and address how to achieve the balance of rights and responsibilities. This campaign could take a number of forms such as documentary drama, one-person show, written report, advertising campaign, extended analytical essay, film documentary, dance production, visual arts gallery display, etc.

## **SOME RESOURCES**

Margaret Adamson, *Australian Women Through 200 Years*. Hong Kong: Kangaroo Press, 1988.

Peter Pierce, *The Country of Lost Children: An Australian Anxiety*. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Ann B. Tracy, *The Gothic Novel 1770-1830: Plot summaries and Index to Motifs*. Louisville: The University Press of Kentucky, 1981.

James Nixon, William McWhirter & John Pearn (eds.), *Poverty in Childhood*. Brisbane: Amphion Press, 1990.