

Hitler's Daughter

THE PLAY

Adapted by Eva Di Cesare,
Sandra Eldridge and Tim McGarry

FROM THE NOVEL BY JACKIE FRENCH



Currency Press,
Sydney

Foreword

When Eva, Sandie and Tim from Monkey Baa approached me to put Hitler's Daughter on the stage, I didn't think it could be done. How can you put modern kids in a flooded country valley as well as war ravaged Berlin on stage? It's easy in a novel ... tell people it's the Berlin of 1945, or that the floodwater's are brown and frothy, and there you are. How can you put a man with a small moustache and long leather boots on stage and call him Hitler without someone giggling?

And then I saw a dress rehearsal. I heard the rain and saw the bombs, felt the shadow of Hitler not just looming over the theatre but wherever people still want to blindly follow leaders who offer them hope or excitement.

It was exactly the world I had written about, and suddenly I was there and so was everyone else in the theatre. Even knowing exactly how they did it still doesn't quite explain the magic of the production.

The play isn't the book, just as the book isn't the play. Each will give you something different. But the heart of both are the same. And there is no way I can thank the team at Monkey Baa for the extraordinary gift of seeing the world in my mind's eye upon the stage, for producing a play that left audiences silent in shock and wonder for twenty seconds before they began to applaud. They were brilliant. Simply and utterly brilliant.

Jackie French

A Note from the Adaptors

One of our chief aims when establishing Monkey Baa ten years ago was to encourage the appreciation of Australian literature in young people. We do this by taking novels from highly respected authors, such as Tim Winton, Morris Gleitzman, Gillian Rubinstein and Andrew Daddo, and adapting them for the stage, thereby giving the audience the opportunity to view a story in two different forms: on the page and on the stage. Jackie French's novel *Hitler's Daughter* is our fifth such adaptation, but our first foray into creating a play for a teenage demographic.

We had been in discussion with Noel Jordan, Head of Young Audiences at the Sydney Opera House, and he presented us with several novels that he felt might work as stage adaptations. One of these novels was Jackie French's *Hitler's Daughter*. We were captivated by it on first reading, and we all felt compelled to adapt it. Often, in searching for a piece to adapt, the three of us read up to sixty or seventy books, spending months tossing around possibilities, and eventually rejecting novels because we can't find a common thread. With *Hitler's Daughter*, we couldn't wait to start!

With all three of us having a keen interest in history, we were excited by the novel's blend of fact and fiction. Very much an Australian story, we were drawn to the novel's juxtaposition of a kind of contemporary ordinariness with an extraordinary time in world history. We loved the story's provocative questions about the manipulation of society in the 1930s and 1940s, and the way the story forced us to question our identity and the world we inhabit. As human beings, how can we overcome the wrongs of the past and forge new paths? Can we honestly and openly face the wrongs, recognise the wrong paths taken in the past and thereby avoid taking the wrong turn again?

We were captivated by the way the chief protagonist, Mark, becomes absorbed by the events in Nazi Germany, and his reflections on contemporary issues: How do we know our parents are doing the right thing? Was our land acquired at the expense of indigenous Australians? We wanted to create a script that moved the audience

to explore the play's themes and ask themselves the same questions that Mark asked himself. Each character in the story offered a different moral perspective, but we didn't want the play to provide concrete, or easy, answers.

We were also excited by the practical challenge of creating two worlds simultaneously on stage: Germany in the 1940s and the Australian bush in the present day. As a small theatre company, we were restricted by a multitude of factors. We needed to create a touring production on an incredibly limited budget that could bump into a theatre in less than four hours, and with only four actors playing all fourteen characters. We were blessed with a highly talented creative team who took on this challenge with fervor and brought our adaptation to life.

We began the adaptation in late 2004. Throughout the process the script was sent back and forth to author Jackie French for suggestions and feedback. During the Sydney Writers' Festival in May 2005, the company conducted a series of creative development workshops as part of the Sydney Opera House Youth and Education Program. High school students shared their thoughts and feelings about the play's themes of racism, prejudice, genocide, generational guilt and responsibility.

And then in 2006, *Hitler's Daughter* toured to 33 theatres throughout five states across Australia, playing to an audience of 24,000 young people. In tandem with the touring production and in collaboration with The Sydney Jewish Museum, the company toured an exhibition of images of the holocaust and testimonials from survivors.

In adapting the novel we not only wanted to capture its 'feel', but stay true to the author's vision, original plot and character journeys, ensuring that the play would enhance the visual images conjured when reading the novel. We feel proud of the final script and are deeply indebted to Jackie French for entrusting us with her stunning story.

Eva Di Cesare, Sandra Eldridge and Tim McGarry

A Note from the Director

We had fourteen characters, four actors to play them, two worlds to create – Germany in the 1940s and a bus stop in the Australian bush – plus it was to be a touring show that had to bump into theatres in less than four hours and we had to depict one of the most evil men to ever live. Now... where to begin? Our first achievement was assembling the dedicated, passionate and talented creative team of Imogen Ross, Luiz Pampolha and Jeremy Silver.

As adaptors we had made certain staging decisions whilst creating the script of *Hitler's Daughter*. We wanted the staging to be relatively simple, and we tried to ensure that objects on stage were multifunctional. The bus stop bench, for example, became, in turn, Mark's mother's car, a German SS car, the school bus, and the single bed in the final bunker scene. Decisions reached during the writing process 'fed' the early design meetings. With the creative team, it was decided that the bus stop would also become Hitler's bunker and this effect was beautifully created by simply dropping a solitary light bulb into the bunker scene.

During my own 'dreamtime' I kept imagining a tree on the stage. In our research we discovered that there was actually a tree planted in the driveway of Berchtesgaden, Hitler's country residence (and a later setting in the stage play), specifically planted to shade Hitler during the parades that marched past him. This was just one of many coincidences that happened throughout the design process that reinforced the design and staging decisions. So we had a tree. I also explored children's stories, specifically German fairytales, and what began to appear again and again were the woods and forests where shadows of monsters dwell and, metaphorically speaking, where we all have to venture in our journey for the truth. The stage design began to develop, and with more trees we now had both the German woods and the Australian bush, where our bus shelter sat innocently like a gingerbread house with its yellow tin roof.

Like a book itself, we envisaged each side of the shelter opening out to reveal other places and times in the story, with Mark's farmhouse and Heidi's home mirroring each other and representing,

in part, how the past is always there in the present and the possibility of inhabiting the consciousness of another time through objects.

The challenge of how to depict Hitler was solved during the adaptation process. Hitler was sometimes portrayed in the 1940s as the evil shadow over Europe and it seemed accurate to represent him as that, a huge shadow lit up on the back cyclorama. In keeping with my fairytale readings, Hitler became the big black monster of many guises, evil in its many forms, the darkness that dwells in human kind. The hanging of a cyclorama at the back of the stage meant that we could incorporate other lighting effects to reinforce the factual nature of the story – a swastika, the symbol of Nazism, and a map of Germany in the 1940s clearly displaying the concentration camps where horrific crimes against humanity took place. At times we flooded the stage with the colours of the German flag when we were in Germany and the red of the swastika also echoing blood on the land, whilst in Australia we chose more cool blues to reflect a world cold and wet, and one not often associated with Australia. We also were interested in the colours of the past, going against the sepia tones of memory, often evoked by photographs. The past then did not become a separate place.

The fall of Berlin was created with strobe flashes. These flashes lit up the trees and brought them alive so that shadows thrown onto the cyclorama became the soldiers and the buildings falling. Accompanying the lighting, sound effects were constructed from everyday sounds, roadwork drills and the like, thus blurring the past and present. Sounds of the woods and shadows of leaves upon the stage also added to the depiction of our two worlds.

The staging challenges were great with only four actors covering multiple roles. I came to rehearsal with some specific ideas regarding the transitions. I was interested in exploring the notions of times crossing and characters weaving in and out of the stories and the worlds. This raised the possibility of both Mark and Heidi meeting briefly, the past and present worlds gently colliding.

It was set up very early in the piece that the actors, by physical and vocal transformation, could become other characters in front

of the audience. Anna could enter the story that she was telling and become the character of Fraulein Gelber. Tracey could change her posture, remove a coat and become Heidi. It became an acceptable theatrical device in the storytelling and very exciting for the actors, and hopefully, the audience too.

We rehearsed *Hitler's Daughter* in four weeks. The actors, Matt Goodwin, Nathan Carter, Mikaela Martin and Tahli Corin, were all extraordinary, bringing to rehearsal great ideas and most importantly enthusiasm. I am entirely grateful and thankful to them for their trust and creativity in bringing this story alive.

Directing *Hitler's Daughter* was a great honour. In the times that we live it takes courage and even humour to consciously look for the good in life. To place ourselves on the side of the caring, the kind, and have empathy and compassion for others is important. By acknowledging our responsibility for humanity, we can embrace the past and enhance our future, not just as individuals but as a race, the human race.

Sandra Eldridge
Director

Monkey Baa Theatre production, 2006