

BLACKOUT

BY DAVEY ANDERSON
DIRECTED BY ESTHER BAKER

IMAGINE YOU WAKE UP
AND YOU'RE IN A JAIL CELL.
YOU GO UP TO THE DOOR.
YOU BANG YOUR FISTS.
SCREAMING. SHOUTING.
WHAT AM I DOING IN HERE?

Synergy
Theatre Project

A TEACHERS RESOURCE PACK

For teachers working with students Year 9+

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- To understand the responsibility of telling someone else's story

BLACKOUT

Written by Davey Anderson

Directed by Esther Baker

Blackout is based on the true story of a young man from Glasgow who committed a violent crime. It is a hard-hitting play about getting bullied, fighting back, doing something stupid, getting into serious trouble and then finding your way again.

It's a play about an outsider who hasn't found a way to fit in; and risks losing everything.

The play is short and can be performed by a cast of any size, from one actor to a large ensemble. The dialect is Scottish but can be adapted to suit any regional accent and dialect.

There are no stage directions. Much is left to the creative team's imagination. While the story is based on truth, the writer leaves certain conclusions to the audience to decide.

MAKING THE PLAY

STAGING THE PLAY: Interview with Director Esther Baker

Why this play and why now?

EB: I encountered the play when I facilitated a workshop on it with Davey Anderson, the writer, at the National Theatre. And I thought then that it's so right for Synergy's work. It's a great piece with so much in it for young people. It feels really contemporary and it's really complex even though it's only 24 pages long. It really addresses violent crime and why it happens. And I think we've got a real problem with young people and violence.

It's very interesting working on it with Synergy because we have a cast and crew of professionals and ex-prisoners, who it really resonates with, both as people who have experienced violence but also having become violent themselves because of unresolved issues.

Did you at any point think about casting an ex-prisoner in the lead role?

EB: The lead has a lot to carry; it's a story-telling performance; a tricky play and you have to be careful not to over-emote it. So, I felt that it would be great to have a professional carrying the protagonist role. I also wanted to have ex-prisoners who bring an authenticity in the cast and also as assistant director and assistant stage managers.

It's not just about what they bring to the play. Their contribution is invaluable in terms of being able to communicate the ideas in the play to young people, via the post-show discussions and workshops.

As part of the process, do you spend time working on the relationship between professionals and non-professionals?

EB: Everyone is treated as a company of professionals. Obviously there is an element of people learning on the job but everyone has an equal voice in the room. The process requires both openness and confidentiality , as people have shared some intense life experiences in the rehearsal room. It's a team effort, very much an ensemble piece. The presence of the non-professionals is an invaluable resource in the room. We don't have to go out and do lots of research about violence and violence in the home. Everyone in the room has something to say about this play that is quite near to them.

What kind of a person does the professional actor need to be therefore?

EB: I think they have to understand why we're doing the project. I think they've got to relate to all kinds of people and enjoy the experience of working with people who have lived these unconventional lives. And they have to be a good actor.

What are some of the challenges of staging this play?

EB: How to put the past and the present on stage. What is in the past and what is in the present? Who takes which lines, as they are not allocated. Those choices affect the meaning of the play. Is James telling the story or is he hearing the story? Who is he talking to? Who is the audience? Is it his key worker? Is it young

people he wants to prevent doing the same as him? There are many options like that.

In terms of staging, you have to go with the economy of the text. It has to be physicalized but it's about finding a way that is subtle but effective. Also, how do you change between roles in a fluid way. We're using video projection so we have to look at how we integrate that. We'll have a lot of technical rehearsals, working on that. We're going for abstract images, rather than literal images which is in keeping with the use of suggestion in the text and in our playing style. And we have chosen a set to go with that as well. Simplicity.

Do you feel a responsibility to communicate a particular message to young people via this play?

EB: I think the play is very responsible. It doesn't focus on crime. It focuses on circumstances around it. We as a company have a responsibility in choosing what we do and don't talk about in the post-show discussions because people in the cast and crew have seen a lot of things and it's not always appropriate to highlight those things.

We also have a responsibility to the ex-prisoners because we're talking about their life stories and it's up to them what they share and don't share.

What would a successful experience of this play be for the audience?

EB: That it engages them and allows them to connect with it emotionally. That it opens up questions for them rather than tells them the answers and that there is

an interesting dialogue between the cast and crew and young people. And that it is of high artistic quality – the art is at the centre of it, not the message. It's not about preaching a message, it's about communicating with them through art.

What about the young people watching who have not experienced violence, who live a life protected from the things James is exposed to?

EB: Empathy. A lot of our work is about challenging the public generally about people who commit crimes. A lot of 15-year olds who commit these crimes are demonised, whereas there are a lot of complex reasons why people do them. I think if we can help people understand that, we can help change their attitude to why and who the people are who commit crime. And they are part of our society.

How much time did you spend with the writer?

EB: We spent a day workshopping and an evening talking about it which was invaluable. I think if the writer of the play you are directing is alive, then it's always worth contacting them because it just gets you beneath the surface of the play. Plays reveal themselves when you're rehearsing them either as strong, complex pieces of work, or the holes begin to show. But this play is fabulously written.

WRITING THE PLAY: Interview with Davey Anderson

Did you choose to write this play in this form? Or was it dictated by the fact you had been commissioned by the National Theatre's Connections Festival and had to fit their criteria?

DA: The honest answer is that was the requirement from the National Theatre. However, I feel like it's the right match of content and way of approaching the content in terms of a flexibility around who is speaking at any given point, and who is being spoken to. I think that's crucial for the content of the piece. I wanted something that could be done by one person or a community of people. The interplay between the individual and the collective is part of the theme of the piece for me.

I'm also interested in something that isn't prescriptive in its staging. From a writer's point of view, I want the input of the creative team and the actors. I want to create the space between the lines where they have to ask questions because the whole point of the play is that it sparks conversations and get people thinking and debating with each other.

Do you find it hard to let go of creative control?

DA: I have two impulses within me as a writer who also directs. I'm a control freak! But at the same time I'm also very interested in collaboration and shared authorship and what that means. For this piece I'm very interested in letting go of control. It's been done before and there isn't a definitive production of this. It can be done in lots of different ways so each time it has to be reinvented and turned into something brand new. But also I see myself in this as a kind of conduit. The piece is based on a conversation with a real person so it involves elements of that

person's life so I feel very responsible for taking care of the origins of the piece in that way.

Do you think this style of writing the play is good for young people, allowing them to fill in the gaps with their own interpretation of events?

DA: Yes. I think it's unusual in the space that it gives and also in the tense and the mode of it where it's not in the first person's voice, it's in the second person. We kind of cast the audience to put themselves in the place of the central character. It asks the audience to do a little more imaginative work I think. I want the creative team and the performers to be really active in the process, as well as the audience as they receive this play.

Are you committed to writing plays for young people?

DA: I think it's one of the strands of the work that I do and it's a very important strand. I think it's because I still remember that time in my life very clearly. It's a time when so many important decisions get made, that affect the rest of your life, in terms of shaping who you are, what is important to you. Also, I really respond to that curiosity about things that you have when you're that age. Things seem possible. You question why things are the way they are. You don't just accept that things are like this in the world. You ask *why* are things like that in the world. And you have this sense of agency; that things can change. I'm really interested by that moment in our lives.

Do you think the director and actors need to decide who James attacks and tries to strangle?

DA: Yes, I think they do. But I don't think they have to communicate that to the audience.

Does it matter who they believe the victim is?

DA: I don't think that matters because it's been fictionalised. The text is not just a documentary. It's been told in a way that relates to a lot of situations, not just one person's situation. So that's the important thing. I don't want it to be treated as a documentary. I want it to be treated as a drama, which raises important human questions and seeks a different kind of truth. The origin of the play is that I was asked to have a conversation with someone who was being mentored by Barnardo's, the children's charity – with someone who was serving a probation sentence and was still in the middle of that sentence. So I had an interesting role: someone who was the perpetrator of a crime but someone who [Barnardo's] see very much as a victim of the things that had happened to him. So there was an element of protecting him.

Do you want us to sympathise with James?

DA: As a dramatist, one of my ambitions is that you should be able to empathise with every character; to put yourself in their position and understand the choices they have made, even if you don't agree with them. And in terms of argument, for me there are definitely always two things going on: there's someone's context and circumstances and there's the active agency of the individual within that. One is not more important than the other. I'm not saying that an individual's moral choices are more important than their social circumstances; or that someone's

socio-economic circumstances dictate and limit their choices. Both things are alive within the piece and I'm interested in the discussion you can have after the play about that.

What would you say to people who will pigeon-hole James as a cliché of white, working-class Brexiteer?

DA: That goes back to the question of whether or not we want the audience to sympathise with him. The idea is that we can empathise. Because we spend so much of our lives dismissing people who are different from us, and who we politically disagree with or who belong to a different geographical place from us, it allows us not to have to think about things from their point of view. And the whole piece is about attempting to see things from another person's point of view.

What do you want to say in the play to young people who do not identify directly with James because their circumstances are not like his?

DA: The most important thing is to spark curiosity. It's not about knowledge-giving or about teaching how other people live. It's an encouragement to enquire. I think teenagers have that strong sense of enquiry. So, what I can do as a dramatist is encourage deeper, further enquiry. I think that's part of my job.

How do you achieve a balance between talking about important social issues in your plays while avoiding lecturing young people in ways that don't interest them?

DA: That's something I wrestle with all the time. Between wanting to be polemical and wanting to make an argument, to direct people towards a certain conclusion. And another impulse of wanting to be someone who listens, who uses

theatre as a tool to put me in a space with other people who have something to teach me. I think that's something that theatre does do very well. When you're telling a story, rather than constructing an essay, I think all of the arguments are still open or you can have multiple perspectives on the same series of events. And so you just have the events laid out very clearly and you can interpret them in different ways. Then when you are encouraged to express your interpretation of events, and someone else has a different point of view, then you have to try and be clearer about why you think this is why he did what he did, or this is what led her to that, or this is what other people could have done or this is what we should do now. All of those things have to be brought into the room.

You don't have to necessarily say those thematic things explicitly. You just tell the story.

Some audiences might feel James reaches a point of understanding and self-discovery too easily and that realising he just needed someone to talk to is not a realistic response. What would you say about that?

DA: I think the question James asks himself is, "What do I do now?". I think that's a genuine question: "What do you think I should do?" not, "What have you got to offer?". This is not necessarily the end of his story. He still has his whole life ahead and there are lots of sequels to this. Even though there is a set of instructions or statements at the end of the play, i.e. "You go back to your house, you apologise...", those statements were in fact questions for the group of young performers who I first worked on the play with. "Is that what you do?"

I like the ambivalence and the open-endedness of him going to bed at the end of the play. He is going to wake up the next day, and then what?

Do you think some people might thing James is being radicalised, in the sense we understand that today? And if they do think that, how do you feel about that interpretation?

DA: I think this character is someone who is searching for an identity; he wants to know who he is, he wants to know where he belongs, to feel at ease rather than a sense of insecurity. So maybe there is something suggestive there to the process of radicalisation – you get to be someone with a purpose. There's a sense of higher purpose that you can tap into. But it's not quite a story about someone who finds a group – he is still on the fringes. There is a feeling of abandonment and isolation and a desperation that comes from that.

Some of the characteristics of the skinhead identity are not that far from what his granddad represented, except they belong to a warped sense of an idol he looked up to. Not necessarily counter to that.

What are you hoping teachers will gain from the experience of the play and workshop with their students?

DA: One thing it's not is a moral lesson. We're not telling teenagers how to behave. But it's a story that demands a response from those who work on it, so it's a real opportunity for teachers to learn what their students think about these issues and I feel like that's a step towards encouraging empathy; seeing things from another's perspective, because you offer that yourself as a teacher. It's a chance to facilitate a discussion about what choices people make in life; what is

the balance between circumstances and people's agency. It's less a chance to come to a conclusion, more a catalyst for a conversation.

I have a real problem with theatre people being experts. Who are the experts in the room? The young people are. They know things I can't know. The theatre is a route towards a deeper conversation. So we need to ask them did this resonate with you? What's missing here. Tell us about how you felt watching it – what's different now?

RESOURCES

UNDERSTANDING FACTORS INFLUENCING JAMES

POLITICS/CULTURE

Millwall Football Club:

<http://www.millwall-history.org.uk/Millwallversusthemob.htm>

White Aryan Resistance: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White_Aryan_Resistance

FILMS

Romper Stomper Guardian Article – 20 years on:

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/australia-culture-blog/2014/jan/10/romper-stomper-classic-australian-film>

Background to American History X:

https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/american_history_x/

FASHION

Skinhead: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/aug/19/skinheads-derek-ridgers-portraits-street-photography-70s-80s-youth-culture>

<https://www.handinglove.co.uk/skinheads-the-1960s-subculture-pop-culture-and-counter-culture/>

Goth: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Goth_subculture

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2017/jun/24/charming-men-dangerous-lovers-sandra-horley-domestic-violence-refuge-book-abuse>

Particularly p172 onwards:

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/182095/DFE-00108-2011-Childrens%20Needs%20Parenting%20Capacity.pdf

BEREAVEMENT, TRAUMA AND CRIME

<https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/impact-bereavement-and-loss-young-people>

<http://victimsofcrime.org/help-for-crime-victims/get-help-bulletins-for-crime-victims/grief-coping-with-the-death-of-a-loved-one>

<https://www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/publications/cjm/article/bereavement-among-young-men-prison>

<https://www.counselling-directory.org.uk/counsellor-articles/the-link-between-childhood-trauma-and-later-violent-offending>

BULLYING: IMPACT AND OFFENDING BEHAVIOURS

<https://www.stopbullying.gov/at-risk/effects/index.html>

<http://resources.uknowkids.com/blog/long-term-effects-of-bullying-on-the-victim>

<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1468-4446.2007.00169.x/full>

WORKSHOP 1:

PHYSICALITY OF THE PLAY

AIMS

- To understand the physical narrative of the play
- To explore group mentality and isolation through a physical, non-verbal language
- To understand building a character through physical preparation

WARM UP

What: *Groups Of...*

How: Ask the group to move around the room in different directions. Call out a number and the group has to divide itself into groups of that size. It's good to choose a number which will not exclude anyone at first e.g. in a class of 30, choose 6.

Repeat. Choose a variety of numbers... when one or two students don't find a group, ask them how they feel to be standing alone. Just one word. Don't unpack what they say, but affirm it.

Repeat and give a very strong direction to the class to work in silence, communicating without words.

Repeat. Begin to give instructions to the group:

- Groups of 4 – A night on the town
- Groups of 7 – Ignoring your mum
- Groups of 3 – Waiting to get James after school

- Groups of 5 – In the cell waiting for your report

Each time someone is left out of a group, tell them to freeze and show ISOLATED.

If interesting tableaux emerge from this, encourage students to stay in position but to look around the room at other groups.

LEVELS OF TENSION IN THE BODY – based on Jacques Lecoq's methodology

Useful resource: <https://dramaresource.com/seven-levels-of-tension/>

This exercise gives students a ‘scale’ to work through, using different levels of tension in the body. It can be applied to individual or group character work.

Describe and demo the scale:

1 - Catatonic

No energy, no muscle tension. Lying on the floor, trying to get up, falling back down again.

2 – Californian

Super relaxed, can move around but very slowly, no motivation.

3 – Neutral

‘Economy’ of movement. No emotion in the body or voice. No energy wasted.

4 – Alert

Stopping/starting. On the inbreath. Rarely breathing out. Constantly aware of something.

5 - Suspense

Little movement. Slower than 'alert'. Holding still for longer.

6 – Big gestures/operatic

Huge drama – anger/joy – not traveling – big arms.

7 – Petrified

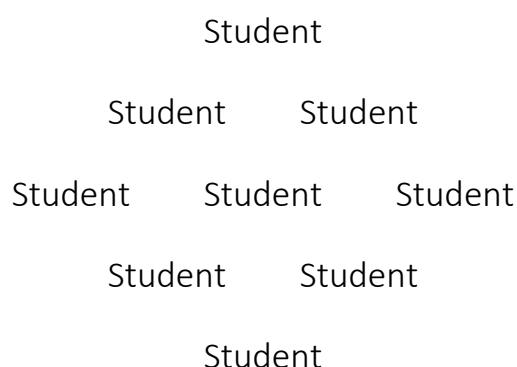
No movement. Complete tension.

CHORUS WORK

The levels of tension can be brought into the next section when the group have understood how to move as a chorus.

Divide the class (or run Groups of... one final time) into groups of an odd number.
9 is good.

Ask each group to form a diamond shape e.g.



All students must face the same direction. They begin to walk slowly in the direction of the leader. After a time, the leader STOPS. Then TURNS to face

another direction. As they turn, the rest of the group turns with them. A new person will then find themselves at the front. They MUST take the leadership and begin to move and the others must follow.

- Note: The group has to move in a straight line. Curves won't work until they have developed a level of expertise with the exercise.
- Tell the group to work slowly
- Begin with 4 students if it is too complicated
- The aim is to move together without talking to each other

This exercise encourages the giving and taking of leadership. Ask students how it feels when they realise they are the leader. How does it feel to follow?

Have the class watch as one group demonstrates this. Ask the observers to comment on what they notice, what it reminds them of?

Develop this into an image of isolation/exclusion: as the group moves around the room, have the student at the back stop walking so they remain still while the rest of the group moves on. Ask them to say one word about how they feel in the moment of separation. Ask the observers to comment on what they notice when one person is isolated.

GROUP SCENES

Ask the students to map/choreograph a piece where the group moves and one breaks away or is left on their own.

Give instructions for how the group might move – slow walk; run; with emotion e.g. a gang on the way to a fight; football hooligans looking for trouble; family approaching hospital knowing bad news awaits...

Hand out extracts of script for the group to speak together and the isolated student to say:

“And then you went into school.

And people would just look at you like

Ooff

He's a pure psycho

But it felt good

Cos you were getting to them”

Play around with who says which lines – the isolated individual or the group...

“And you remember the night it finally happened...

It was raining

James?

That's your mum

Shouting up the stairs

You turn off the music

I'm just away up to hospital to see your granddad

You don't respond

D'you want to come with me?

Not tonight mum"

Students work in groups and present their work demonstrating:

- Group movement
- With text
- Isolated character

REFLECTION

Discuss how it feels as a performer to be the character or show the emotion physically rather than verbally

Discuss the effect on the audience

Discuss the production and what part physicality played in it (e.g. very little text; small set; discuss levels of tension and how they were used to tell the story).

WORKSHOP SESSION 2:

INFLUENCES IN JAMES'S JOURNEY

AIMS

- To mark significant moments in the narrative which offer choice/create consequences
- To explore consequences of these influences
- To discuss the choices and responsibilities we have for ourselves and others

WARM UP

What: Go – a ball game

How: Group stands in a circle. One person in the middle has a soft, football-sized ball. They begin to throw the ball to different students in the circle, not necessarily going round in order. The ball to's and fro's quickly. It is not to be held on to. Almost like tennis.

Anyone from the circle can say ‘go’ at any point. As they do so, they step into the centre, replacing the person there who has to step out and join the circle. The aim is for the flow of throwing and catching the ball to continue without a break. This continues with different people stepping in, each time saying “go” to let the group know they want to go in the middle.

It is a game of choosing to make a move; to step back.

TABLEAUX

Discuss the influences on James's life since childhood, for good or for bad e.g. witnessing his dad's violence towards his mum; the positive influence of his

granddad on him; the effect of his granddad's illness; the influence of film, fashion, politics, football, school.

Divide the group into small groups of approximately 5.

Ask students to create still images of showing one of the influences discussed.

Show these to the class. This is image 2.

Then ask each group to create an image showing what happened BEFORE that moment. This is image 1.

Followed by an image showing what happened AFTER that moment. This is image 3.

Each group then links their three images together. A useful mechanism here is to count slowly from 1 to 5 and have the groups move in slow motion so that they arrive in the next image by the time you have counted to 5.

Once each group has mapped out this journey, the students can add text. Encourage them to create their own text, in the style of the play i.e. the text doesn't have to 'belong' to specific characters.

Useful instructions:

- One line per person, although not everyone needs a line
- Play with whole group speaking together as a chorus

Eventually, mini-plays showing how James was influenced and what the outcome was are created. Show these to the class.

ADDITION

Invite a student from the audience to join the action after the third tableau e.g. James's story of watching his dad hit his mum; leading to him getting into a fight and enjoying the pain; leading to him becoming numb and unable to feel emotion, leaving him isolated from friends. Then a new person joins in the scene with a line of text, placing themselves in the action e.g. in this case playing mum, key worker etc.

The idea is to create alternative scenarios to the actual play.

REFLECTION

Discuss the question of whether James's actions are inevitable given the influences in his life. Did making these mini-plays offer the possibility of him finding another way? What would have helped him take another direction (e.g. influence of positive role model; one interested friend; pro-active mum)?

WORKSHOP 3:

STORYTELLING

AIMS:

- To look at the various ways a story can be told and how various techniques affect the impact of the story
- To create our own stories
- To understand the responsibility of telling someone else's story

This play is ultimately a piece of storytelling. It's a story that can be told in a number of ways, given the freedom provided by the writer in not allocating parts and creating the piece for performance by 1 or 30 people and any number in between.

WARM UP

One-word stories.

Students pick a partner.

They link arms if comfortable doing so, or stand side-by-side close together. They begin to tell an unplanned story, by walking around the room in their pair, ignoring everyone else (but not bumping into them). They can only say one word each. They cannot tell each other what word they want their partner to say. They have to accept the word spoken but also take responsibility for ensuring the story continues to make sense.

The story is fictional and can be as unusual, eccentric or fantastic as they wish.

The aim is to create a story, so they will need to consider how to demonstrate sentences beginning and ending, with voice, word choice etc.

Demo 2 volunteers and ask them to tell a new story to the class, while walking around, rather than repeat the one they just created.

SOMEONE ELSE'S STORY

In groups of 3.

One person tells a story of something good which happened to them. Maybe a trip to the cinema which they really enjoyed; a great birthday celebration; football match, party. *They only have 1 minute to do this but the idea is not to rush.*

As they tell the other 2 people their story, the observers notice body language, gesture, facial expression.

Swap so each person in the 3 tells a story.

Ask the whole class, what are the common behaviours they noticed when observing stories about a positive experience (sitting upright, big gestures, wide eyes, smiling, high energy perhaps...)

TELLING SOMEONE ELSE'S STORY

Staying in their group of 3, the group decides whose story they are going to work on.

They then prepare a performance of this story, playing with and using techniques in the play e.g.:

- Speaking directly to the audience
- Speaking all at once
- Speaking directly to one another
- Sitting/standing
- Speaking to different listeners e.g. parent, friend, teacher, enemy, police
- Being grouped in a small space/standing far apart

Each group performs story to the class.

REFLECTION

What method of storytelling do we find effective? As an audience, what draws us in or creates distance between us and performer?

What methods are most effective for creating tension?

How does it feel to have your story told by others?

Davey Anderson, writer of *Blackout* took very seriously the responsibility he had as the teller of someone else's story. Ask the students if they felt any responsibility to the person whose story they were telling.