

**TRAVERSE
THEATRE**

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TRAVERSE THEATRE COMPANY
present the world premiere of

The Dark Things

by Ursula Rani Sarma

Learning Resource Pack : October 2009

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Note to Tutors

This resource pack has been compiled to accompany and enhance your students' experience of the Traverse Theatre Company's production of Ursula Rani Sarma's new play with songs *The Dark Things*.

The resource materials and activities within the pack are specifically designed to target students studying Higher Drama. It is hoped that this resources pack will aid students with their study of the Contemporary Scottish Theatre unit of Higher Drama. This resource pack is designed for use by both teachers and students. All sections can be photocopied for use in the classroom.

If you have any queries, comments or feedback about the pack please contact Traverse Learning by phone 0131 228 3223 or by email noelle.o'donoghue@traverse.co.uk.

Synopsis: *The Dark Things*

Set in the aftermath of a tragic bus crash, *The Dark Things* tells the story of Daniel and LJ the only two survivors of the accident. Daniel, a talented and award-winning young artist struggles to come to terms with his 'survivors-guilt'. Physically unscathed by the accident Daniel searches for ways to apologise to the victims' families – he feels, in some way, to blame for their loved ones' deaths. The emotional effect of the crash gives Daniel artistic block and with an important art exhibition ahead of him he searches for a cure. He forms a friendship with LJ who like him survived the crash but unlike him did not come out unhurt instead losing her legs. Their relationship is unbalanced. LJ is in love with Daniel but his guilt about her injuries is his reason for their friendship. Daniel later finds out that he was the reason LJ was still on the bus when the accident. Having found Daniel attractive LJ stayed on the bus past her stop hoping he would notice her. Meaning that unfortunately for LJ she was still on board when it crashed.

As well as trying to recover emotionally from the accident Daniel has his younger step-sister Steph to deal with. With a troubled past Steph seeks solace in Daniel's flat. Much to Daniel's dismay Steph is an untidy and needy housemate. With her heart in the right place Steph tries to help Daniel recover but actually ends up getting more help from him than the other way around. Living in the shadow of her brother Steph longs to be famous – even being photographed by a local tabloid excites her. When Steph meets Karl, an electrician, who claims he works in video production she jumps at his offer of meeting music company representatives only to discover that he has lined her up to be in a porn film. Karl does not have a positive influence on Daniel either. As Daniel struggles to understand his emotions he starts to hurt himself physically and when he asks Karl to hit him with a golf club, rather than refuse Karl happily does the deed. Karl also berates Daniel about his artwork and even graffiti's on one his paintings. When Daniel uses images of the victims of the bus crash Karl tells Daniel how disgusting he is for capitalising on the families' misery. Karl also preys on LJ. Knowing that LJ feels unattractive after losing her legs Karl propositions her telling her that he is doing her 'a favour...' (Karl, Scene 13).

Daniel, realising that he needs professional help to cure his artist block, seeks out psychiatrist Gerry Mitchell who famously helped another artist cure his block. Unfortunately for Daniel, Gerry has since been involved in some shady dealings with clients.

Claiming to help mentally ill patients, Gerry has assisted a number of patients with suicide including his own wife. Now under investigation Gerry's practice is falling down around him. Rather than helping Daniel, Gerry needs help himself. As Gerry spirals downwards so does Daniel who begins to obsess over one of the crash-victim's mothers. Daniel's obsession comes to a climax when he breaks in to the woman's house and watches her sleeping. Realising his behaviour cannot continue, Daniel decides to end his life. However, rather than doing it away from the public eye he plans to make his suicide into his final piece of artwork by filming it. Daniel invites the crash victim's mother to attend his suicide although, she does not show up. As Daniel sets the scene Gerry turns up to tell Daniel that he wants to kill himself and he wants Daniel to film it. As the pair argue over who should killing themselves, eventually deciding they should do it together, LJ has taken Daniel's gun and camera outside. After sleeping with Karl and unable to recover emotionally from her injuries LJ shoots herself while the camera is recording. Unfortunately LJ does not manage to kill herself but leaves herself in a vegetative state. On LJ's request Daniel uses her film as part of his exhibition but he, Gerry and Steph leave before the film is shown. Daniel and Steph decide to go home to their parents.

Characters: *The Dark Things*

Daniel (played by Brian Ferguson)

Daniel is young, award-winning artist until he is involved in a horrific bus crash that throws his life off course. One of two crash survivors, and physically unscathed, Daniel struggles to cope with the guilt of his survival. As his major art exhibition approaches emotional scarring, gives Daniel creative block. Daniel seeks a cure firstly by trying to harm himself and then by enlisting the help of, psychiatrist, Gerry who has previously helped another artist to recover from creative block. Unable to come to terms with what has happened; Daniel starts to obsess over one of the crash victim's mothers. Daniel starts to believe that his only way out is to kill himself and in order to be forgiven for surviving he wants to film it and also invites the crash victim's mother to watch him do the deed.

LJ (played by Suzanne Donaldson)

LJ, a young woman and former strip-club dancer, was the other survivor in the bus crash. Unlike Daniel, LJ did not come out of the accident without injury losing both of her legs leading her to be wheelchair bound. LJ finds it difficult to come to terms with the crash and her injuries. Although LJ puts on a brave face she is drawn to Daniel for support. Although LJ is in love with Daniel she also blames him for what happened to her. Having seen Daniel on the bus and finding him attractive LJ stayed on past her stop; had she got off the bus at the right stop she would never have been involved in the accident. Throughout the play LJ tells Daniel to get 'over it' and move on however, emotionally the accident has affected her more than she lets others believe. So much so that LJ uses Daniel's gun to take her own life

Steph played by Nicola Jo Cully

Steph, Daniel's half sister, has been staying with him since the accident. Steph has had a troubled past and hopes that by living with Daniel she will be able to get back on her feet. Jealous of Daniel's fame, Steph seek attention and reassurance from those around her. Steph is not a good judge of character and allows people to walk all over her – this is clear when she starts a relationship with Karl who claims he can make her famous. Steph goes with Karl, to what she believes is a music video shoot, only to discover it is a shoot for an adult video. Taking on board advice from LJ, by the end of the play Steph starts to stick up for herself more.

Gerry played by David Acton

Gerry is a psychiatrist. He famously helped artist David Wrixon recover from artistic block. Daniel goes to Gerry for help getting over his own artistic block. However, Gerry's psychiatry practice is in disarray due to his own emotional problems. Gerry is about to go on trial for helping patients to die. Most recently he assisted his wife with her suicide. Gerry feels old and does not want to live anymore. Gerry turn up when Daniel is about to kill himself – they decide to do it together. Neither of them gets the chance.

Karl played by Keith Flemming

Karl is dating Steph but likes to think he is a player. He tells Steph that he works in production when in fact he is an electrician/handy-man. Karl torments Daniel about his art work telling him that it is rubbish and that he is disgusting for using images of the crash in his exhibition. Karl wants to control Steph but when she starts to resist he goes after LJ.

Interview: Ursula Rani Sarma, Playwright

How and why did you become a playwright?

I had always loved writing stories from a very young age but it wasn't until I went to University that I began to write for the theatre. Up until that time, the only plays that I had seen were classics which although I enjoyed, I didn't find very relevant to my own life or experiences. While involved with the drama society in University I was exposed to more contemporary work which excited me and made me want to try writing a play that I felt I would like to go and see. It was the live aspect of theatre which excited me and which continues to, the idea of a world emerging and disappearing in front of your eyes.

What made you decide to write *The Dark Things*?

I was interested in the idea of what it would be like to be the only one who survived a horrific accident. When I began writing the play there had been a series of accidents in the news involving rail and air disasters. Mixed in with this interest was my fascination with the world of visual art. The character of Daniel was born out of these thoughts and so I began to write the play.

How long has it taken, from start to finish, to write *The Dark Things*?

In total it has taken about four years.

What is your writing process?

When I begin writing a play I usually have a central character in a particular situation. By writing I discover the story behind this character. I never know what is going to happen when I begin; the characters kind of take me with them. Then I deliver a first draft to the company who give me notes and feedback and I proceed with a second and third draft.

What would you say are the main themes of the play?

Loss,
Guilt,
Celebrity culture,
Self-discovery

The relationships between the characters are very interesting, how did you develop these?

For me the characters develop their own relationships with each other as I write them.

Getting the right mix of actors must have been important to make the characters real, were you involved in the casting process?

I was involved in the casting of most of the actors and I very much enjoyed it.

The character of Daniel uses his art to come to terms with a life-changing accident, were you inspired by real accident victims' reactions?

I had seen some stories in the news and I spent a good deal of time researching case studies, which dealt with survivor guilt and posttraumatic stress. I hadn't come across an artist in particular but I was interested in how an artist would feel about their work after a near death experience.

Interview: Dominic Hill, Director

What initially interested you about *The Dark Things*?

I have always loved the dark, twisted view of the world presented in the play. It reminds me of a David Lynch film. I like plays where the world seems to be our own but is really a slightly warped view of the world we live in and I think this play is like. I love the poetry and the images - it's full of wonderful sad images, headless crash victims, falling dancers, the dead listening. I love all that

What would you say are the main themes of *The Dark Things*?

I think the play explores the role of the artist and art in society. It also explores guilt and survival. Above it is about a group of recognisable, lost individuals who are trying to make sense of the world. I think we can all relate to that.

The relationships between the characters are integral to the play, how will you develop these?

Everything is in the text; we tease out all the information from the text and see how that relates to the characters. Through exploring the scenes we are exploring the characters' relationships

How did you decide on the cast for *The Dark Things*? I'd worked with Brian and always thought he would be wonderful as Daniel. Keith I worked with a lot at Dundee Rep. The others I was lucky to find through auditions. They are a wonderful cast.

What is your process in rehearsals? Where do you start? How do you know when a production is ready?

I work very much from the text - trying to understand why a character says or does what he says or does. And we try things different ways to explore the different possibilities within the text. I guess you know when a show is ready when you've exhausted all possibilities and the meaning of the text and situation is as clear as it can be for the audience. But you could go on rehearsing for ever.

Do you work with the writer during rehearsals? If so why?

Absolutely. Ursula has been in rehearsals the whole time and has written and rewritten as we go along. It's been a very organic process.

Have you been involved in the design for the show?

Yes, we discussed different ideas at the beginning and through a process of different models of the ideas for the set, arrived at what seemed the most appropriate for the play. For this show we looked at the work of lots of contemporary artists and the spaces they displayed their work in.

What is your favourite part of the production process?

I love rehearsals. I have a great cast for this show and working with them has been really enjoyable and playful.

What advice would you give to aspiring directors?

See lots of theatre, read lots of plays, have a go at directing and try to understand what it is you are doing when you direct. There are lots of useful books that have helped me by Mike Alfreds, Katie Mitchell, Declan Donnellan, Peter Brook to name a few. Also working as an actor I think is very useful for directors to understand what actors need from the process.

Themes

Loss

The theme of Loss is prevalent in *The Dark Things*. Daniel and LJ were involved in a serious bus crash leading to a huge loss in life. Although Daniel came out of the accident unscathed he feels he has lost a part of him emotionally. The accident causes Daniel to lose his ability to create works of art: “it’s affecting everything...like I’ve lost something...I can’t work” (Daniel, Scene 4). The loss of life and his own survival has affected Daniel severely. His survivor’s guilt stops his creativity and ability to see the world clearly. LJ is also affected by loss however, for her it is the physical loss of her legs that leads to her emotional turmoil. Although she tries to hide it LJ longs to walk and dance again. She takes Daniel to the lap-dancing club she used to work in so that she can relive her past life. Daniel is horrified that LJ would put her self through seeing the girls at the club. Such is her emotional scarring that LJ does not see anything wrong with visiting the club, describing it as her ‘normality’ (LJ, scene 11).

Celebrity

Throughout *The Dark Things* the idea of ‘Celebrity’ features. LJ and Daniel have celebrity that they do not want while Steph craves fame and success. In the past Daniel was happy about the celebrity he gained from his art work but now he is now recognised more for surviving the bus crash: “I know you...you’re that guy...that guy from the bus crash...” (Karl, Scene 5). Daniel hates his new-found fame “I don’t really like talking about it” (Daniel, Scene 5). Instead Daniel tries to cure his artistic block and regain the fame he had for being a talented artist. However, Daniel struggles to move on from the accident and uses it as a stimulus instead. LJ also has to deal with the fame that comes from being a survivor of the bus crash. However, as her life prior to the crash was not in the limelight LJ manages to avoid the attention that Daniel receives.

Steph searches for attention and recognition. Steph clings to Karl when she believes he can make her a popstar and is delighted when her photo is taken for a newspaper at Daniel’s exhibition opening: “I’ve had my picture taken twice tonight.” (Steph, Scene 7). Unfortunately for Steph she is destined to remain in Daniel’s shadow.

Study, Practical & Writing Exercises

The following exercises have been designed for use in the drama classroom. There is a mixture of discussion, written and practical exercises to aid students with their study of Theatre. These exercises should be used post-performance to enhance the performance for students.

Group Discussion

Discussion 1

The themes of tragedy and loss are prevalent in *The Dark Things*.

Task

Work in groups to:

- Discuss why Daniel is drawn to Michelle after the bus crash
- Consider Michelle's reaction to losing her daughter and Daniel's obsession with her.
- Compare and contrast Daniel and LJ's reactions to the accident

Discussion 2

A number of the characters in *The Dark Things* are affected by celebrity/notoriety.

Task

Work in pairs to:

- Create a list of the pros and cons of celebrity
- Discuss Daniel's reaction to his celebrity status (through his art and the bus crash)
- Compare and contrast Steph's ideas about and need for celebrity to Daniel's.
- Think about how LJ might react to being known as one of the two survivors of the crash.

Discussion 3

During *The Dark Things* the audience discovers that Gerry has helped some of his patients (and his wife) to die.

Task

Work in groups to:

- Research euthanasia and assisted deaths/suicides
- Divide into two smaller groups and debate the reasons for and against euthanasia and assisted deaths/suicides (one group should take one side of the argument and the other group the other side)
- Following the debate, discuss why Gerry might have chosen to 'help' his patients in this way.

Use this task to help you with *Improvise 2*.

Writing Exercises

Write 1

Daniel becomes obsessed with Michelle however, the audience never sees her.

Task

Work individually to create a character description of Michelle. Consider her relationship with Daniel.

Who do you think this woman is? Note down things about her:

- Background
- Lifestyle
- Appearance
- Personality
- Relationship with Daniel

Use this description to help you with the practical exercise Improve 1 in the next section.

Write 2

Throughout the play LJ comes across as the most 'together' character however, by the end of the play the audience realise that LJ has been hiding her true feelings.

Task

Work on your own to write a letter from LJ to Daniel telling him exactly how she feels. Use clues in the play to help you show her state of mind. Think of the letter as something Daniel reads once LJ has died.

Write 3

The set and costume design of a play are critically important as a place for the action to take place.

Task

Work individually to design your own set for *The Dark Things*. Think about the story of the play and how you want to portray that story through your design. When thinking about your design remember to consider:

- The stage configuration (e.g. In-the-round; promenade; etc)
- The Set, furniture and props
- The characters costume and make-up
- The lighting and sound designs

Draw an annotated ground plan of your set and write an outline of your design which includes the four elements listed above. Also remember to mention any symbolism you have included and how the set helps to tell the story.

Practical Exercises

Improvise 1

As mentioned in Write 1 Michelle is featured throughout *The Dark Things* but never appears on stage.

Task

Referring back to the description of characteristics you made in writing exercise Write 1 work with a partner to improvise and develop a scene between Michelle and Daniel. Consider what Michelle might say to Daniel about her daughter and how Michelle might feel about Daniel's survival.

Improvise 2

In *The Dark Things* Gerry is a very troubled character having helped a number of people, including his wife, to die.

Task

Work with a partner to create a scene where Gerry is on trial for his part in the assisted deaths. Consider what testimony Gerry might give to explain his actions. Decide with your partner whether you think Gerry should be found guilty or innocent.

Publicity Photos: *The Dark Things*

All photography by Richard Campbell



Keith Fleming as Karl & Brian Ferguson as Daniel



Nicola Jo Cully as Steph



Keith Fleming as Karl & Suzanne Donaldson as LJ



Brian Ferguson as Daniel



Brian Ferguson as Daniel & David Acton as Gerry