

# Children of the Black Skirt

Angela Betzien



Currency Press, Sydney

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Real TV is an artistic team that formed in late 2000. They have created new work for Queensland Theatre Company (*The Orphanage Project*, 2003), La Boite Theatre (*Kingswood Kids*, 2003), Queensland Arts Council (*Children of the Black Skirt*) and QPAQ's Stage X festival (*The Suitcase*, 2001). Real TV has received grants from Arts Queensland (2002 and 2001) and the Australia Council (2002). *Children of the Black Skirt* is Real TV's seminal work and has toured with Queensland Arts Council to Queensland regional and metropolitan high schools. The popularity of the play resulted in a second regional tour of Queensland in 2004 and a subsequent tour throughout regional Victoria presented by Regional Arts Victoria. In 2005 the play tours South Australia, as part of Adelaide's Come Out Festival for Young People, to Regional Victoria, and the work will also have a season at the Sydney Opera House as part of the HouseEd program. Real TV has received numerous awards for their productions. Real TV's mission is to produce quality theatrical Australian stories.

*Children of the Black Skirt* was developed by Real TV and produced by Queensland Arts Council. It first toured in 2003, throughout regional and metropolitan Queensland high schools with the following cast:

Jodie Le Vesconte	Black Skirt / Harrold Horrocks
Louise Brehmer	New One
Sandy Greenwood	Old One / Rosie

Director, Leticia Cáceres  
Composer & Sound Designer, Pete Goodwin  
Designer, Tanja Beer

The play toured again in 2004 with the following cast:

Jodie Le Vesconte	Black Skirt / Harrold Horrocks
Louise Brehmer	New One
Janine Matthews	Old One / Rosie

*The play is dedicated to children who  
have lived in institutions.*

## Acknowledgements

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For further information about Real TV, or to purchase the *Children of the Black Skirt* music and sound on compact disc, contact:  
[www.realtv.net.au](http://www.realtv.net.au).

## 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)*

## 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.

## Characters

### **Lost Bush Children (3)**

**New One**, eight years old, new arrival at the orphanage (The identity number J78 is worn on New One's uniform. The J represents her junior status in the orphanage.)

**Old One**, eleven years old, Aboriginal child at the orphanage. (The identity number S78 is worn on Old One's uniform. The S represents her senior status. Senior children share an identity number with Junior children for whom they have a responsibility of care.)

**The Black Skirt or Miss Emily Greenant**, the silent Governess of the orphanage

**Rosie**, the Aboriginal laundry woman

**John**, Cockney chimney sweep, 1790s

**Lizzie**, Scottish girl, 1850s

**Maggie**, Australian girl living on the frontier, 1880s

**Lucy**, Aboriginal 'domestic' girl, 1910s

**Harrold Horrocks**, Inspector of Orphanages

**Iris**, Australian girl living in the city slums, 1930s

**Tom**, boy from Yorkshire, 1940s

**Ruby**, Aboriginal girl living in the city, 1960s

**Baby**, stillborn, 1890s

**Gentleman, Banker, Beggar, Magistrate**, 1790s

**Lizzie's Mother**, 1850s

**Maggie's Mother, Father**, 1880s

**Nun, Mrs Connell**, 1910s

**Iris's Dad, Landlord, Neighbour**, 1930s

**Fat Man, Tom's Mother**, 1940s

**Ruby's Mum, Welfare**, 1960s

**The Black Skirt's Aunt, Doctor**, 1890s

These characters can be played by three actors.

Suggested doubles for main characters are:

Rosie / New One; Black Skirt / Harrold Horrocks

*An abandoned orphanage somewhere in the Australian landscape.*

*Three CHILDREN emerge from the bush. They are lost. They are barefoot and their clothes are dirty and torn.*

*As the CHILDREN encounter the orphanage they fall silent. Warily at first, they begin to explore. They pick up old scrubbing brushes, overturn dormitory beds with their dusty sheets, and peer into cobwebbed suitcases and boxes.*

*One of the CHILDREN discovers a very old Victorian-style black dress lying on the floor. She shows the others, who dare her to try it on. Attached to the black dress is an enormous pair of scissors. The other two children also find dresses and try them on. They giggle at the game of dress-up.*

*As the child draws the black dress over her own clothes, she suddenly becomes the character who once owned the dress, the cruel governess of the orphanage, known by all as THE BLACK SKIRT.*

*The other children, as if trapped in this strange spell, also become the characters who once owned the dresses they now wear...*

*One girl becomes the character of ROSIE, the Aboriginal laundry woman who worked at the orphanage.*

*The other child becomes NEW ONE, a new arrival at the orphanage.*

*The sound of a train.*

*NEW ONE picks up a small suitcase and sits. She begins to move with the rhythm of a train.*

*The train comes to a halt and NEW ONE is greeted by ROSIE who takes her suitcase and leads her through the orphanage to the shower room.*

*The sound of dripping water.*

**Rosie** Listen now, this is what yer do. Yer take all yer things off, that's right. Yer got to wash yerself real well, then put these on. These are all yer things. These are the things yer wear at night 'n these are the things yer wear at day. Yer understand? That lady in the black skirt gets cross if yer do the wrong thing. You gotta

do what she tells yer, everythin' she tells yer. Hush now, don't cry, hush now.

*ROSIE leaves.*

*NEW ONE is left to whimper in the dark.*

*ROSIE presents NEW ONE's suitcase to THE BLACK SKIRT.*

*THE BLACK SKIRT opens the suitcase and silently inspects its contents. She withdraws, one by one, an item of underwear, a teddy bear, a book of fairytales.*

She's eight, Missus. Her mother 'n father is dead, Missus, she's a Ward of the State, Missus. Yes, Missus, I'll burn them things, Missus. No, Missus. Do what you say, Missus.

*THE BLACK SKIRT places these items back in the suitcase and returns it to ROSIE. THE BLACK SKIRT leaves.*

*ROSIE goes to the incinerator in the orphanage grounds. She sings as she regretfully burns the contents of NEW ONE's suitcase. At the last moment, ROSIE spares NEW ONE's book of fairytales and hides it in her washing basket. ROSIE hurries away.*

*THE BLACK SKIRT appears in the shower room carrying a heavy set of keys. She leads NEW ONE through the dark corridors of the orphanage to the girls' dormitory, then silently instructs her where she is to sleep.*

*THE BLACK SKIRT leaves the dormitory.*

*OLD ONE, a young Aboriginal girl, is kneeling by her bed in prayer. She quickly finishes, then jumps into bed.*

*NEW ONE begins to cry.*

*OLD ONE withdraws a candle and a box of matches hidden beneath her bed. She lights a match, then the candle. The light startles NEW ONE into silence.*

**Old One** It's all right New One, hop into bed. Quick, before she comes back.



*NEW ONE gets into her bed. OLD ONE blows out the candle.*

*The ghostly sound of a baby crying.*

*THE BLACK SKIRT can be seen nursing what appears to be a baby in the distant corridors of the orphanage.*

*The voices of spirit children fill the orphanage. They are the ghosts of Children Past.*

*NEW ONE covers her head with her bed sheet. She is terrified.*

*OLD ONE is familiar with the spirits. She tosses and turns in her bed, annoyed that she can't sleep for all the noise they are making.*

*The spirit voices fade as the sound of a kookaburra heralds the morning.*

*OLD ONE addresses the audience.*

Hey, all you girls. New One looks like she's heard a ghost. You have. Them the spirits. Them the sad lil' fellas come here every night. Look, all you girls, New One so scared she peed the bed. Don't worry, them spirits won't hurt yer. Them just kids like us.

*THE BLACK SKIRT enters the dormitory. OLD ONE warns NEW ONE to keep her head down. THE BLACK SKIRT claps once. OLD ONE jumps out of her bed and kneels on the floor in prayer.*

*NEW ONE tries to follow OLD ONE's lead.*

This is our Home,  
Let Love abide here.  
Let us always speak the Truth,  
Love the Truth,  
And live the Truth.  
May contentment dwell in our hearts,  
May our Home be a place of joy and companionship  
Where the love of our Matron reigns.  
In the name of her we pray.  
Amen.

*THE BLACK SKIRT claps again and the children make their beds.  
THE BLACK SKIRT inspects the beds. She discovers a wet sheet on  
NEW ONE's bed, picks it up and covers NEW ONE's head with it.  
THE BLACK SKIRT claps again and OLD ONE leads the chant of  
humiliation...*

Pee the beds, pee the beds, pee the beds...

*THE BLACK SKIRT sends NEW ONE out into the orphanage  
grounds where she is forced to march back and forth  
chanting...*

**New One** Pee the beds, pee the beds, pee the beds...

*ROSIE appears in the dormitory, THE BLACK SKIRT passes her.*

**Rosie** Them kids pee the beds again, Missus? Yeah, I'll wash them sheets, Missus. You send them lil' ones to me, I'll fix 'em up. Yes, Missus. No talkin' to them lil' ones, I know, Missus. Yes, Missus. Do what you say, Missus.

*ROSIE picks up her wash basket, goes to the clothesline in the orphanage grounds and begins to hang sheets on the line.*

*NEW ONE appears near the washing line still wearing the sheet on her head. She sees ROSIE and watches her from a distance.*

*A curlew calls and the ghostly sound of a baby crying echoes through the landscape.*

*The sound of the children's spirit voices in the wind.*

*ROSIE hears these spirits and soothes them by singing an Aboriginal lullaby.*

*The spirit voices fade.*

*ROSIE notices NEW ONE and beckons her over. She takes the wet sheet from NEW ONE's head and gives her another clean folded one.*

That song keeps them spirits quiet. Don't want 'em too big, they tear them sheets off the line. Dunno where I learned that, jus' know it. Them spirits like tellin' stories too. You like stories?

*ROSIE gives NEW ONE her book of fairytales that she saved from the incinerator. She sees THE BLACK SKIRT approaching.*

*Keep that hid, yer hear. Best go now. Quick.*

*NEW ONE hides the book under her clean sheet and runs inside the orphanage. ROSIE gathers up her wash basket and hurries off to work.*

*NEW ONE returns to the dormitory, hiding her book of fairytales beneath her pillow.*

*THE BLACK SKIRT claps and the orphanage children assemble to sing 'God Save the Queen'.*

*The song ends and the children queue for dinner. They are served by THE BLACK SKIRT. The meal quickly disappears, but the children are still hungry. NEW ONE is about to ask for more but OLD ONE quickly hushes her.*

*THE BLACK SKIRT claps once, dismissing the girls from dinner.*



*Rosie's lullaby.*