



Debra Oswald is a writer for stage, film, television and children's fiction.

Her stage plays have been produced around Australia. *Gary's House*, *Sweet Road* and *The Peach Season* were all shortlisted for the NSW Premier's Award. Her play *Dags* has had many Australian productions and has been published and performed in Britain and the United States. *Gary's House* has been on the senior high school syllabus, and has been performed in translation in both Denmark and Japan. *The Peach Season* won the 2005 Seaborn Playwright's Prize. *Mr Bailey's Minder* broke the Griffin Theatre's box office record in 2004, toured nationally in 2006, and was produced in Philadelphia in 2008.

Debra has written two plays for the Australian Theatre for Young People. *Skate* was performed in Sydney, on a NSW country tour and at the Belfast Theatre Festival. *Stories in the Dark* premiered at Riverside Theatre Parramatta in 2007.

She is the author of three 'Aussie Bite' books for kids, including *Nathan and the Ice Rockets*, and five novels for teenage readers: *Me and Barry Terrific*, *The Return of the Baked Bean*, *The Fifth Quest*, *The Redback Leftovers* and *Getting Air*.

Among Debra's television credits are 'Bananas in Pyjamas', 'Sweet and Sour', 'Palace of Dreams', 'The Secret Life of Us' and award-winning episodes of 'Police Rescue'.



Clare Testoni as the Miller's Wife and Robert Braine as the Miller in the 2007 atyp production. (Photo: Allan Vella)

STORIES IN THE DARK

DEBRA OSWALD



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Back cover shows Tyrone Lindqvist as Neighbour 1, Caroline Main as Anna, Claudia Tory as Hunter's Wife, Barton Ware as Hunter and Noni Hollonds as Neighbour 2 in the 2007 atyp production. (Photo: Allan Vella)

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Director's Note

Towards the end of *Stories in the Dark*, a 12-year-old boy, Tomas, tries to explain why he likes stories and folktales. He struggles to articulate a reason for something he knows is deeply important to him, something that is of enormous personal value and yet, at the same time, difficult to grasp.

This is the core of Debra Oswald's play. *Stories in the Dark* is a kind of dramatic tug-of-war centring on the worth of stories in a time of extreme crisis. During the rehearsal period for our production the cast and crew actively wrestled with this issue throughout the process. At times we felt we agreed with Anna, the 16-year-old, that stories are 'childish rubbish'. At other times we felt that the simple joy of a tale well told was a great gift for our terrified characters.

In the end we disagreed with Anna. (Perhaps not surprisingly, as good theatre is, after all, good storytelling.) Wisdom from the past never intends to solve present problems. This is a promise stories never make. However they do function to remind us of our humanity, to imagine a world other than our own where a theme, event or action may impact on our own dilemmas. Stories ask us to listen to their wisdom and make of it what we will. Like in the theatre, those who receive the story have a role to play; they must interpret the story and, potentially, discover something meaningful that does change their present.

And there is something else; where the simple act of telling a mysterious, surprising, funny and fantastical tale is, perhaps most importantly, reason enough.

Stories in the Dark presents wonderful challenges for any theatre group or school tackling the play. Debra's play is constructed around the telling of six complete stories. These tales call for ogres, giants, blind kings, wolves and many other creatures of fantasy all to be fully realised on stage. So when I first read the play, it was, well, a little daunting! But this is what is great about it. The play can be performed by a cast of 60 or ten. It can be performed using a wild array of costumes and prosthetics or, if you choose, with nothing but the actors' craft and a few cardboard boxes. As you will see from the photos in this volume, atyp used masks as the central

performance aesthetic for the telling of our stories. This helped with the speed of the overall production and helped with the quick changes. But this is only one solution among many: each production will be different. The play is a great challenge where the whole cast and crew can come together to work out how to tell the stories in the best way.

Timothy Jones

Timothy Jones Artistic Director of atyp and directed the first production of *Stories in the Dark* in 2007.

Playwright's Note

Sometimes I get the spark for writing a new play when I suddenly find a connection between two of my obsessions. That's how *Stories in the Dark* came about.

When I was a kid, I was fascinated by folk stories and borrowed armloads of library books of myths and tales. In recent years, I discovered the great store of tales on the internet. I would lose myself on the net for hours, following trails of story from one website to another. I found myself back at the local library, trawling for books of legends again. But I had no idea how I would ever use this fascination with folk tales in my own work.

Around the same time, I became interested in the struggle of the international legal system to find justice for victims of war and genocide. I was reading books about Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia but I didn't imagine such reading would find its way into my own work. And I had no idea those two interests of mine would intersect.

During rehearsals for another play, I got chatting to one of the actors: the wonderful Maggie Blinco. We shared our love of folk tales and Maggie told me a delightful story about performing in the musical *Oliver*. At the beginning of the second act, Maggie and the young actor playing the lead role would sit on a piece of scenery suspended high above the stage. They had to wait there in darkness for twenty minutes until their cue to be lowered onto the stage. To pass the time, Maggie would tell the boy a story, whispering it aloud. Eventually, Maggie ran out of stories. She began reading from books of traditional tales by the light of day so she would have a fresh story to relay to the young actor each night in the dark, high above the stage.

I loved Maggie's story and it helped me click an idea into place. I would throw the world of folk tales into the middle of a dark place—a contemporary, painful situation where the stakes are very high for two kids trapped in a war-torn city. For Anna and Tom's story, I've drawn details from the siege of Sarajevo but the setting could be many times and places.

Folk tales, from many different cultures, are an extraordinarily rich form. I love the way they offer exotica and earthiness,

slapstick comedy and heartbreaking moments, disturbing ideas and nourishing ideas, connecting us to the wisdom of previous generations, feeding our yearning to imagine a world where things are fair, lucky, potentially magical.

Stories are a way to imagine ourselves through dilemmas and emotional blows we might have to face one day, so they can be part of our moral and spiritual education. During a time of crisis and dislocation, the tales can remind us that other kinds of life went on before this and will happen after this.

There's something about the simplicity and mystery of folk tales told aloud that can draw listeners in, sneaking around our opinionatedness and prejudices, to touch us deeply. Many of the stories are surprisingly dark, fatalistic and funny, facing the reality of death and suffering, urging us to endure and try to laugh at life's grim elements.

Then again, should we regard most folk and fairytales as just romanticised, escapist fantasies? Do they anaesthetise us and trick people into expecting the world to be fair when it's not? Are such stories inadequate, absurd or even offensive in the face of ugly reality? Or can they help the human spirit to survive? These are some of the questions I wanted to explore in *Stories in the Dark*.

I had a great long list of tales I wanted to draw from but only a few would fit into this one play. The first story, 'The Ogre's Three Golden Hairs', is a pretty straight adaptation of the Grimm brothers' version. But the Grimm brothers were themselves retelling a traditional tale which exists in other versions. Many of its story elements—the abandoned baby rescued by a childless couple, a boy sent on an impossible quest, etc.—pop up in countless tales.

One of the fascinating things when you read tales from different cultures is the way strikingly similar elements crop up in stories from all over the world. A good example is the image of 'singing bones'—the idea of the bones of a murdered person crying out for truth and justice. There are singing bones stories from Africa, Scotland, India, Russia and elsewhere.

With the tales for the play, I felt free to scrounge chunks from various traditional stories and glue them together, adding my own variations, settings and twists. For a story like 'The Ice Dragon and the She-wolf', I fished bits from the sea of folk tales—a village terrorised by a dragon, a woman trapped in an enchanted animal skin, a mother's sacrifice, an extreme landscape, the power of true love, etc.—and I used them in my own combination to create a

‘new’ story which would do what I needed for that moment in the play. That’s exactly how folk stories work, constantly adapting and borrowing.

In choosing stories, the most important goal was to create a powerful chemistry between the tales Anna and Tom tell each other at night and the daytime story of their struggles in the city. In the end, I wanted this play to be about the power of stories and the limits of stories, about friendship, loss and survival.

The cast and creative team of the atyp production then faced the job of handling this odd mixture—creating the grim, dangerous reality of a city in war as well as bringing fantastical folk tales to life on stage. We had a lot of fun creating ogres, princes, she-wolves, toxic dragon poo, singing bones and the rest.

I want to thank the Literature Board of the Australia Council, Richard Glover, Maggie Blinco and Michael Wynne, everyone at atyp and Riverside Theatres. I’m grateful to the fabulous creative team and young cast of the atyp production whose ideas helped shape this play. Most importantly, I have to thank Timothy Jones who supported and guided the project from its beginning as a two-sentence notion right through to doing a great job of directing the first production.

Debra Oswald



The author received assistance for this project from the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body.

First Production

Stories in the Dark was first produced by Australian theatre for young people (atyp) and Riverside Theatres at the Lennox Theatre, Riverside Theatres Parramatta, on 30 April 2007, with the following cast:

Tomas	Cooper Torrens
Anna	Caroline Main
Miller, Ferryman, Elf, Farmer Jones, Villager, Child Puppeteer, Nick	Robert Braine
Miller's Wife, Townsperson, Woman 2, Musician 2, Lazy Gus, Woman in Coat, She-wolf/Katerina	Clare Testoni
Boy, Man in Jacket, Serge, Fisherman, Villager, Neighbour 1, Potato-head Boy Princess, Woodcutter's Wife, Blackmarket Woman, Lazy Gus's Wife, Woman in Water Queue, Anoushka, Neighbour 2	Tyrone Lindqvist
Nasty King, Station Guard, Doctor, Horse, Ivan	Noni Hollonds
Townsperson, Man 1, Woodcutter, Peter, Villager, Hunter	Kyle Hedrick
Ogre's Grandmother, Woman Neighbour, Musician 1, Mrs Brown, Woman 3, Villager, Hunter's Wife	Barton Ware
Ogre, Sardine Man, Blind King, Cheerful Man, Villager, Man in Water Queue	Claudia Tory
	Dean Mason

Director, Timothy Jones

Assistant Director, Danielle O'Keefe

Set and Costume Designer, Jo Briscoe

Lighting Designer, Sydney Bouhaniche

Composer and Sound Designer, Max Lambert

Characters

Anna

Tomas

All the other roles can be performed by an ensemble of six or more actors:

Miller

Miller's Wife

Boy

Nasty King

Princess

Ferryman

Ogre's Grandmother

Ogre

Man in Jacket

Sardine Man

Cheerful Man

Gus's Wife

Lazy Gus

Mrs Brown

Fisherman

Farmer Jones

Horse

Woman Neighbour

Station Guard

Doctor

King

Serge

Peter

Musician 1

Musician 2

Blackmarket Woman

Woman in Coat

Villagers

Dragon

Ivan

Katerina/She-wolf

Anoushka

Hunter

Hunter's Wife

Neighbour 1

Neighbour 2

Nick

Potato-Head Boy

Various men and women in queues, city streets, townspeople, party guests

Setting

City streets and a derelict house in a war-torn city, such as Sarajevo.

ACT ONE

Scene One

Night. A once-grand city house, battered by mortar shells. There are a few bits of furniture half buried under rubble.

A sixteen-year-old girl, ANNA, enters and switches on the unbroken bulbs on the ornate light fitting. She drags in a car battery and fetches plastic bags which she dumps onto the floor.

A boy lurches up from behind a pile of junk—TOMAS. He's disoriented, terrified, but full of bravado. His sudden appearance makes ANNA yell out with fright, ready to defend herself.

Anna What are you doing? Get out!

When she sees it's just a kid, she relaxes a little.

You shouldn't skulk around like that!

TOMAS grabs a hunk of wood as a weapon.

Tomas Don't come near me!

Anna Whoa... I'm not going anywhere near you.

TOMAS lowers the weapon.

Tomas Who are you? Was I asleep? Must've fallen asleep.

Anna Yeah, well, whatever. Get out.

Tomas Is this your house?

Anna No.

Tomas You can't tell me to get out if it's not your house.

Anna Yeah? Is that what you reckon, you little insect?

She grabs a broken chair.

Get out now or I'll wrap this round your stupid head.

TOMAS gets ready to defend himself with the hunk of wood.

Tomas I'll fight you.

ANNA snorts a laugh and drops the chair.

Anna Oh, I'm too tired. Go back to where you came from.

TOMAS doesn't answer. ANNA scrutinises him.

Ah, you're a country bumpkin, I bet. A farm boy.

TOMAS shrugs.

You and your family dig potatoes and push goats around?

Tomas Well, on our farm, we've got— [pigs and fruit trees]

Anna Yeah, whatever. You're in the city now, potato-brain. And the point is, this is my spot, so you can't stay here.

Tomas I don't want to stay here anyway.

Anna Excellent. You'd better get going.

Tomas [*peering out the window*] Is it night already?

Anna Hey, bring any food with you from the farm? A cabbage? A few carrots?

TOMAS shakes his head. ANNA casts a disdainful eye over him—that'd be right.

She rummages through the plastic bags to find various items.

She untangles a string of party lights and hooks them up to the car battery.

Tomas What's that for?

Anna Word is the power's getting cut off tonight. I'm going to be ready.

Tomas That's dumb. They're not even proper lights.

Anna These little guys suck up less power. So the battery'll last longer.

Tomas But they'll fix the electricity.

Anna You understand nothing, cabbage-head. In this city, we've been putting up with crap for months now. A thousand different kinds of crap. And I bet we don't even rate thirty seconds on the world news anymore. I bet—

ANNA realises she's gone into a rave and confused TOMAS.

Look, the militia—the arseholes over there shooting at us—they cut off the power and water when it suits them.

Tomas You stole that car battery and the party lights.

Anna [*laughing*] Do you think anyone's planning a party tonight?

A mortar exploding in a neighbouring street makes TOMAS jump with fright.

Oh, must be the party fireworks.

Tomas That was a shell. A mortar.

Anna The kid's a genius.

TOMAS peers anxiously out the window.

How old are you?

Tomas Almost thirteen.

Anna Twelve.

Tomas How old are you?

Anna A hundred and five.

Tomas I'm not stupid. You can't talk to me like I'm stupid.

TOMAS goes to leave.

Anna Really? Where are you off to now?

Tomas Wherever you're supposed to go until they find your parents.

Anna Listen, carrot-boy, don't go out unless you know exactly where you're going.

Tomas I'm not a carrot-boy. I have a name—Tomas. And I'm going.

Anna There's a curfew for a reason. In the day, there are snipers, stray mortars, but at night, it's way uglier. At night, either side could shoot you.

Tomas I can look after myself.

TOMAS has been selecting the best weapon for himself from the piles of rubble.

ANNA watches him, then laughs.

Anna Boys. Stupid boys. You won't keep that head on your shoulders for very long.

Another explosion outside makes TOMAS tremble.

Tomas Soldiers bashed in our door in the middle of the night, shouting, said we had ten minutes to pack our stuff.

Anna I bet, in the end, they only gave you two minutes.

Tomas They made everyone get on trucks but we all ended up on different ones. When the truck stopped in another town, I snuck out, tried to find someone from my family but it was too dark.

Anna So what—did the soldiers catch you?

Tomas No. I hid in a ditch until it got light.

Anna Your parents are in the city now?

Tomas I think so but I don't—I'll find the place you're supposed to go to get everything sorted out. But probably night time isn't the best time.

Anna No, it isn't, you cabbage-headed moron.

TOMAS is fighting tears. ANNA sighs, annoyed.

You can sleep over there tonight. Do whatever in the morning.

ANNA drags out her bedding, carefully rolled and hidden behind rubble.

TOMAS looks through debris to find something to sleep on.

Tomas What's your name?

Anna Anna.

Tomas Where's your family? I mean, are they— [in the city?]

Anna Father: pissed off years ago. Mother: in the markets the day those big shells hit. Killed—probably—ninety-nine percent sure. Our apartment: got robbed by soldiers. Now: I need sleep so can you keep your mouth shut?

Tomas Yeah, sure, I can—

ANNA glares at him. TOMAS shuts up and organises his bedding.

The light flickers and then the bulbs go out, leaving total darkness.

Anna Told you.

Tomas What's happening?

ANNA switches on the party lights, powered by the car battery. They create an oddly festive coloured glow.

Anna Ha. Party time.

TOMAS jumps up and tries the electric light switch.

Tomas The power'll come back on in a sec, won't it? It can't be—

A bullet hits somewhere close.

TOMAS gasps and drops to the floor.

Anna Stay below window height. Don't give those bastard snipers a free shot.

TOMAS is too shaken to move.

I'll leave the lights on for a sec while you find a sleeping spot. Did you hear me? Hurry up.

Tomas Why can't you leave them on all night?

Anna Number one: can't waste battery juice. Number two: they aim for lights. Safer in the dark. Hop into bed, princess.

Tomas Don't call me that.

TOMAS turns his back on her and curls up on the floor using a curtain as a blanket. He keeps a lump of wood close by, as a weapon.

ANNA turns off the lights.

In the darkness, we hear the sound of mortars and sniper fire—some close, some distant.

Turn the lights on. Turn the lights on.

ANNA turns the lights back on.

Anna What? Ahh... scared of the dark. Where's your deadly lump of wood now, tough guy?

Tomas Shut your mouth, you—you bitch. You have to leave the lights on or I won't be able to sleep.

Anna Not my problem.

ANNA reaches to turn off the lights.

TOMAS immediately starts making some annoying noise.

Tomas I won't stop. All night.

Anna Oh! You little maggot! Hey, I worked out a good use for your weapon—I'll hit you over the head so we can both get to sleep.

Tomas Shut up! I'll punch you in the head if you come near me!

Anna You always been scared of the dark or is it just—

Tomas I'm not. I used to be—sometimes—when I was a little kid. Can't we just talk or something?

Anna Eh? Talk about what? I'm going to sleep.

She turns off the lights.

*In the darkness, we hear distant shelling and then the sound of
TOMAS trying to stifle sobs.*

ANNA groans and turns on the lights.

TOMAS doesn't want her to see him crying.

I told you, there's nothing I can do.

Tomas My mother used to read to me when I couldn't sleep.

Anna Yeah? Must've been country bumpkin paradise for you and
the goats.

She reaches to turn off the lights, then sees TOMAS's face.

I can't read to you. Just lie there *thinking* about nice things, okay?

Tomas That won't work.

Anna Oh, look... I don't know what—If I tell a story, will you shut up
and let me sleep?

Tomas What if it's a crap story?

Anna Bugger you, then. No story.

Tomas I don't know if it's a crap story until I hear it.

ANNA turns off the lights.

We hear a shaky intake of breath from TOMAS.

Anna Sshh. Don't get in a sook. Shut up and listen.

Tomas Okay.

Anna Right, well, story starts when a baby boy gets born with some
special thing so that everyone in the land knew he would grow up
to marry the king's daughter and, y'know, become the king.

Tomas What special thing? How did everyone know the baby boy
was special?

Anna Oh, I don't know. Can't remember... He had a birthmark on
his belly. Something. So—umm—the king heard about this and
didn't like the sound of it. He tricked the parents into giving him
their baby—

Tomas Why would the parents let the king take their baby?

Anna Well, let's say the king killed the parents and snatched the
baby.

Tomas Okay.

Anna The king put the baby in something—

Tomas In what?