

Set Text Guide: DNA



GCSE (9-1) Drama

Pearson Edexcel Level 1/Level 2 GCSE (9-1) in Drama (1DR0)

GCSE Drama 2016: DNA

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Summary

One

A Street/A Field/A Wood

Mark and Jan discuss a mysterious death and the action moves between the groups of characters, introducing them and their take on the death of a boy. It is revealed that this is Adam, a bullied victim of the gang. He is presumed dead after Mark and Jan tell about how they taunted and teased him and led him to a grille covering a deep shaft and threw stones at him as he walked across it and finally fell into the hole, presumed dead.

Phil, a largely silent character who spends a lot of time eating and drinking, devises a plan to frame a non-existent person for Adam's death. This plan involves stealing a jumper and a pair of shoes from Adam's house, putting them in a plastic bag to avoid DNA contamination, then conspiring to make a stranger touch the jumper, and put it back into the plastic bag with his DNA on it. The stranger would thus be framed for the murder. Phil's plan also involves having one of the gang members – Brian – telling his headteacher that a fat postman with bad teeth has exposed himself to him in the woods.

Two

A Street/A Wood/A Field

Although Phil creates the 'fat postman with bad teeth' after Adam has been reported missing, the police find a man who fits the description. This is because Cathy, in an attempt to make the suspect as realistic as possible, found a postman who matched Phil's description, and contrived to have him pick up Adam's jumper when she dropped it.

The plan has gone wrong and an innocent man has been framed. Brian has been asked to go to the police station to identify the man, but he is scared, so Phil threatens him to make him go.

Three

A Street/A Field/A Wood

Cathy has discovered Adam alive and living in the woods. He has clearly been affected by what has happened to him. In a shocking twist, and to save themselves from having to reveal the truth of the gang's plotting, Phil takes charge and demonstrates to Cathy how to kill Adam with a plastic bag.

Four

A Street/A Field

Jan and Mark and then Richard and Phil in brief conversations about what has happened to the others.

Characters

Phil

Phil is often silent when present, although he does spend a lot of time eating and drinking and listening to what is going on around him – even if he does not appear to be doing so when, for example, addressed by Leah. When he gives his instructions to the gang, he is cold and callous in the planning of the cover-up and framing, but he also has an air of authority that makes the others obey him.

Phil is a controlling character and, in the gang, this could be reassuring for the others – knowing the strength of character of the person who leads them. Although he ignores her for much of the play, when Leah finally leaves him, this is the only moment when he addresses her. He makes decisions for the gang, not all of which are accepted by all members and, in the final moments of the play he is seen with Richard – a Leah ‘substitute’, but the relationship is not the same as Phil is not eating.

Leah

She is certainly insecure in her relationship with Phil – for much of the time they are together, she is attempting to get a response from him. She threatens to leave and, when she eventually does, it is in silence, with him calling after her.

Her monologues – for that is essentially what they are – use various tactics in her attempts to elicit a response from him. Although she is a member of the gang and therefore under Phil’s leadership, it is clear that she is intelligent – as in some of her monologues – and has a mind of her own – standing up to Phil over his response to Adam’s reappearance. It is unfortunate that she does not have the strength to convince others in the gang not to carry out Phil’s plans for Adam and her only course of action is to leave the gang.

Leah displays a sense of loyalty towards Adam – reminding Phil about how long they have known him, for example, and she is a voice of reason at times.

Jan

With Mark, Jan is responsible for the bullying that leads to Adam falling through the grille. In her description of the events leading to this there is a sense of the cruelty of the actions.

Mark

With Jan, Mark is responsible for the bullying that leads to Adam falling through the grille. He tries to justify what they did by saying that Adam was enjoying it.

Cathy

Cathy can be described as sadistic. She shows no remorse for the gang’s actions and even finds the situation exciting and better than ordinary life.

It is clear, fairly early on, that she will carry out the wishes of the leader – whoever the leader is – and she enjoys the attentions of John Tate before Phil takes charge and she effectively becomes his deputy in the gang. She is asked to be interviewed on television – which adds to her excitement – with the thought of making money for it. It is Cathy who obtains DNA evidence from an actual postman who fits Phil’s fictional description.

It is not clear whether this is accidental or deliberate but, looking at the play in its concluding moments, it is probably the case that she deliberately set out to frame the postman for Adam’s ‘death’. Her physical violence becomes more obvious – she slaps Brian, for example, and her tone of voice is often aggressive. She is enjoying the attention.

Brian

Is easily led and is dominated by everyone, particularly Cathy. He is either the youngest or the weakest – or both – as he is the one chosen to report the fictitious incident to his headteacher as he is the one who they think is most likely to be believed. It is Brian who finds Adam living in the woods – and therefore sets in motion the chain of events that follows, although at some personal cost.

Adam

His return is pivotal to the plot structure of the play, and it is important that his reasons for not going home after recovering from his fall through the grille are articulated effectively. He has had a blow to the head from the fall and his memory of events is weak and his speech is confused and disjointed. As already stated, it is important that this is articulated effectively in order for the subsequent events to be believable within the structure of the play – the normal reaction to falling through the grille and coming round again would be to go home or to seek help from others. Adam does neither of these things, so this must be explained by the blow to the head and this needs to be effectively portrayed for it to make sense to the audience.

We learn from Mark and Jan that Adam was enjoying the game they were playing, but there is no evidence of this in Adam's speech when Brian discovered him living in the woods and takes him to meet the others.

Social, cultural and historical context

DNA was originally commissioned by NT Education as part of its Connections project, and was performed professionally at the Cottesloe Theatre of the National Theatre in 2008.

The play deals with a range of contemporary issues as seen through the eyes of its disaffected and alienated characters. None of them appears to be connected to anyone outside the play, and at times, even their connection with one another appears rather tenuous. We are told of events that happen 'off stage' and places the characters have been – school, the police station, for example – but the play is structured around their world of '*A Street/A field/A wood*'. They are outdoors, but do not appear to be at ease with nature, and it is interesting to note in a play written in 2007 the absence of the technology that now dominates most teenagers' lives. It is certainly a play of its time and represents a particular view of teenagers but, in avoiding the obvious communication methods favoured by most teenagers, Dennis Kelly has, in fact, made *DNA* more of a timeless piece – and therefore less likely to date – than, for example, Enda Walsh's *Chatroom* (2005) which, like Kelly's play, was commissioned by NT Connections.

The characters are loosely drawn. Kelly tells us that their names and genders are suggestions only and can be changed to suit performers, which makes their actions and reactions more important to the way the plot unfolds than their gender. The characters live within the world of the play and the events that brought them there, and they rarely comment on anything other than their immediate world and the complications of the relationships through which they explore it. Events outside their world – such as the bullying of Adam, or the collection of DNA, are reported in such a way that the audience is invited to question their accuracy as recounted by what are, on the whole, unreliable witnesses.

The play is divided into four sections, each of a similar structure and all centred round the same basic locations – making the staging of the play both simple and challenging, depending on the kind of stage space to be used. The episodes within the four sections are made up of confrontational situations, with, for example, Leah and Phil's exchanges framed around her addressing him with no verbal response from him, creating exchanges that are constructed as a series of monologues. At other times – with Jan and Mark, for example – it is as if two characters are speaking as one, completing each other's sentences as they describe what happened to Adam.

Lack of communication between characters not only helps to create powerful dramatic tension that often explodes into furious argument but is also indicative of many in our society who find it difficult to connect with others on a one-to-one basis or in telling a story can only do so through lines learned and repeated.

DNA, as a drama, takes the negativity and nihilism of a group of teenagers to a new level. We see no redeeming features in any of the characters – where there might have been a counter-argument to Phil's plotting, the character is confined to his room, as in the case of John Tate, or moves schools, as in the case of Leah. Presenting this particular view of teenage life challenges audiences both to understand that there is a whole world of experience going on under our noses that we will never know about, and to recognise that the two boys who murdered James Bulger in 1993 were ten years old at the time – younger than any of the characters in Kelly's play.

As a result not only of the initial act of violence but also of Phil's solution to Adam's return, this play has provoked intense discussion about right and wrong and our responsibility for each other. It plays out almost like a Greek tragedy or a Shakespearean plot for modern times. In a society that is supposedly governed and driven by a moral code, there is nothing moral in the actions of these characters.

Often performed by youth groups and schools/colleges, Kelly's play resonates in its accessibility for a younger audience and performers.

Themes

Gender identity

What might be less obvious in the play is the extent to which Kelly's declaration that the characters' names and genders can be changed would influence not only the dynamics of the gang but also the impact of individual actions on the audience. Kelly is saying that it does not matter whether the characters are male or female, that either sex is capable of carrying out these actions and of being affected by them. Being part of the gang is not about gender, but about an attitude that enables you to belong. An all-female, all-male or reversed-gender cast would enable an exploration of 21st-century gender identity.

Gangs and belonging

In the episodic structure of the opening duologues, Kelly presents a build-up to the identity of the individuals in the gang before bringing them together to react to the news of Adam's death. They are seen in disparate pairings at first, and the nature of what they have done is revealed gradually through their reaction to the death of Adam, particularly in relation to the way the events are told by Jan and Mark.

John Tate attempts to ban the word 'death', resulting in an attempt by Richard to take control of the gang. Power struggles ensue and sides are taken. The intervention of Phil – largely silent until this point – gives the plot its sinister twist and explores the nature of belonging and how far gang members are prepared to go to be part of the gang. Phil has not spoken up to this point, despite his girlfriend, Leah, attempting to engage him in conversation. Now he sets out a plan to shift the blame for Adam's death away from the group – with DNA as part of the cover.

Jan, in her description of the attack on Adam, appears to relish her role in it. Cathy, having found a match for the fictitious description of the alleged attacker, assumes the role of gang leader by the end of the play, while Leah leaves, unable to cope with Phil's response to Adam's reappearance. Being part of the gang and belonging to it appear to be fluid states as members age, become disillusioned or find other interests.

Bullying

Kelly explores psychological bullying as well as the physical abuse of Adam, and clear parallels can be drawn with recent real-life cases of bullying that ruined people's lives. Phil is perhaps the most interesting character, as he does not respond to Leah's appeals for assurance and security. His seemingly callous disregard for her feelings amounts to bullying, and his reaction to her leaving at the end of the play is a surprise – it is the only time we hear him address her directly – when it is too late.

Jan and Mark recount with relish what they did to Adam when they believe he died falling through the grille because they threw stones at him.

John Tate appears to bully mercilessly to keep power. He disappears from the action early but is referenced as having 'lost it' and 'found God' as the play progresses. Kelly reminds us through a few characters that their actions clearly have consequences.

This gang – like all gangs – has its weaker members. Danny, the aspiring dentist, and Brian, for example, are used ruthlessly by Phil to help in the cover-up, but their compliance is only assured through threats of a fate like the one suffered by Adam. Everyone is arguably damaged by what happens, whether it is John Tate taking to his room, Leah moving schools, or Cathy taking on the sadistic mantle.

Responsibility

The play demands that the audience question who is ultimately responsible for the group's callous behaviour towards Adam, both in the initial attack and later, when he

reappears as a feral child living under a hedge, apparently untouched by the kind of searches carried out in the real world when a child disappears.

The characters fight to save themselves from blame or, at least, to find some justification for their actions. Jan and Mark consistently refer to 'laughing' and being 'in stitches' as they recount Adam's desperately sad attempts to be accepted by the group as he was made to eat leaves, steal vodka, had cigarettes stubbed out on him and ultimately fell to his 'death'. The shock and guilt are seen in the almost throwaway exchanges such as when Leah says to Phil: 'you're not human'.

As a collective, the gang take responsibility as a shared 'burden', a device designed to keep all the gang members quiet. The structure of the gang appears to be that they are all in it together but, like Orwell's *Animal Farm*, some are more in it than others.

When, for example, Phil states, 'I'm in charge. Everyone is happier. What's more important: one person or everyone?', he is starting to make them all feel that they cannot step back from the solution to Adam's reappearance. By carrying out Phil's plan, the gang will be responsible for cold-blooded murder, not accidental manslaughter. For Phil, this seems like a small step after he has insisted that Brian positively identify the completely innocent postman whose DNA was found on Adam's jumper.

The core themes of self and group identity, bullying, cruelty and responsibility should allow all young people to develop opinions about the consequences faced by the characters in this play – and, interestingly, why there is no mention of mobile phones or other devices mentioned in the play, almost as if the gang will form its own network.

Resources

There is a wealth of resources available on the Pearson Edexcel website and these are being added to and updated regularly. Many are free to download.

YouTube is a useful source of a range of productions of the play. Some are full length, others are extracts. They can be used to stimulate ideas and discussion around the tone of a production as well as the ways in which the characters can be portrayed.

Oberon Plays (school edition) – recommended edition for Component 3
ISBN 9781840029529

Soundtracks that may be useful when exploring *DNA*:

- music from any current artist to punctuate/underscore or simply to mark a change of time/location
- various location sound effects – street/field/wood – to support the isolation of the characters but to indicate the presence of a world around them – available online.

Model Box resources

www.theatre-inabox.com

Other resources

www.nationaltheatre.org.uk

Free downloadable resource from the NT production of the play

www.ayoungertheatre.com

A review of Hull Truck's production of the play, on tour, at the Unicorn Theatre

www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-features/9052744/Dennis-Kelly-Rioters-thought-there-were-no-rules-but-my-characters-know-right-from-wrong.html

Interview with Dennis Kelly

Practical exploration activities

Performers

The following exercises are designed to help theatre makers practically explore some of the key characters, themes and ideas that are central to *DNA*. Some of these exercises may help performers to consider how key roles might be communicated and realised from 'page to stage'. This is not an exhaustive list; it is a guide.

Off-text improvisation is a useful explorative technique to consider the 'before and after' life of the play. For example, a useful exercise would be to create a news report for which some of the characters are interviewed for the local media after reporters are alerted to events surrounding Adam's disappearance. Each character will have a different viewpoint, but there will be an element of control by Phil in what is said. This could be particularly useful to develop the structuring of events for individuals who are more connected to the plotting – Brian and Cathy, for example. It would also be interesting to have John Tate and Leah interviewed, perhaps years after the events.

Past 10 seconds In this activity, take the characters back in time in stages: 10 seconds before the start of the events of the play, then 10 minutes, then 10 hours. Then take them forward again to show how the established events of the play are shaped by what has gone before.

Hot-seating is a valuable and exciting method to develop characterisation. It helps performers to 'flesh out' their understanding of the characters. Using their imagination and the information provided in the given circumstances will allow the performers to consider the voice, attitude and physicality of the character they are exploring.

Circle hot-seating is a variation on this. The group sits in a circle with the names of characters on the backs of some of the chairs. If you are on one of the named chairs, you become that character for the time you are there, and answer questions as that character from others on non-named seats. Then, on a signal from the director, everyone moves round one chair, and the next person then has to pick up on the character if they land on a named chair.

A more theatrical way of exploring hot-seating might be to combine this exercise with an off-text improvisation. For example, take some of the incidents as described by Jan and Mark, or Brian telling his headteacher about the incident in the woods, and devise work around the incident(s) in order to develop an understanding of the impact events would have had on these and other characters as they unfolded.

Gestic props and multi-role are also effective ways of developing details of character. For example, it might be useful in practical workshops to collect a series of props that might be associated with characters. There is no mention of mobile phones or other devices, so it would be interesting to know what these characters have in their pockets and bags – in addition to Phil's food and drink.

Students should be encouraged to explore the range of characters in the play, as this will allow them first-hand experience of how each character might stand, use space, behave in silence and in relation to others, particularly in moments of tension and revelation – Phil's plotting and Adam's return, for example. Role and gender reversal could be part of this exploration of character.

Exploring accent and dialect can also help performers to consider character choices. For example, a voice workshop that explores a range of accents might help to stress an attitude of a specific character. Do they all have the same accent/dialect, and is it this that makes them part of the 'gang'? Or is the relationship built on other considerations?

It is worth considering what the theatrical impact of specific accent choices for the characters in the play would be, particularly as status and dominance are so important to the characters. It is sometimes useful to explore a vocal mantra for each character. Finding a line or phrase that is said by each character can help to define their attitudes and emotions.

Exploring the vocal placement of each character can also help performers to define detail and bring a role to life. Key vocal resonators to explore include the nose, the throat, the stomach, the chest and the head. What quality is explored when the voice of the character is placed in a different resonator?

It might be useful to explore different resonators with a key monologue or speech. For example, the opening exchange from Jan and Mark, or Leah's address to the silent Phil.

Non-verbal communication is often a highly effective way to explore character, subtext, tension and silence. How does each character behave in moments of silence? There are numerous opportunities within the text to explore physical reactions and to give an indication of what the individual character is thinking. Non-verbal communication will communicate subtext and detail in the power struggle between John Tate and Richard, or Jan and Mark's story, or the re-appearance of Adam, for example.

Non-verbal details can also develop the mood and atmosphere of a moment and stage directions often give insight into the non-verbal details of a character's behaviour. This again would be interesting to explore in a practical workshop. For example, look at Phil's moments with Leah during which he is eating and drinking as she is talking, and explore the way his actions punctuate her speech.

Directors

The following exercises are designed to help theatre makers explore some of the key concepts, characters and themes that are central to *DNA*. Some of the suggestions may help directors to consider how key ideas in the play might be communicated and realised from 'page to stage'. This is not an exhaustive list; it is a guide.

It might be useful to set up a **production meeting** and pitch for your students – either as one group or in smaller groups, depending on numbers – as this will help them to consider the play as a whole and root their practical ideas in aims and intentions.

Remember audience impact is key and that setting up small groups of potential theatre makers might help your students to consider the text in a holistic way. In this model, for example, a group of five could consist of a director, set, costume, sound and lighting designers. The director puts important questions to each member of the team in order to develop a creative concept for a production of the play then sells a potential 'theatrical' pitch to the teacher (producer or 'dragon') in order to secure funding. It is important that the director has an overall vision for the play in performance, and the design team should question the director on their overall approach and theatrical intention.

This is a useful discussion exercise that also lends itself to research, images and presentations. It can work at the start of a scheme of work to initiate ideas and contextualise themes and key moments or, probably more effectively, at the end of a scheme of work as a way of ensuring all aspects of production are considered. It is important with this activity that each member of each production team should justify their ideas with key moments from the play.

Another useful exercise for a director to consider involves **staging and rehearsing a key scene** with a particular focus and then trying it in an alternative style. For example, it might be useful to explore the moment of Adam's re-appearance when all eyes are on him. Try exploring the scene by reversing the levels of status to look at what happens when Adam is strong and overpowering and looking for trouble, compared to a more conciliatory Phil, for example. This would impact on the dynamic of the moment. As a director, you would be encouraging performers to think about appropriate interpretations of characters, within the context of the whole play.

A director may **explore the structure of the play** and look at other ways into it. For example, starting with Act Four, then flashing back or rewinding the story to the beginning and taking the narrative through until the end might be an interesting way of tracing the effects of the events of Adam's disappearance on the individuals in the gang.

Designers

The following exercises and ideas are designed to help theatre makers explore some of the opportunities, themes and ideas that are central to *DNA*. Some of the suggestions may help designers to consider how key aspects of the play might be communicated and realised from 'page to stage'. This is not an exhaustive list; it is a guide.

Creating a model box of a potential set design is a useful exercise and can be as simple or as elaborate as required. It is often useful for students to see how each act will be played in a potential space, and by creating a model box they will be able to refer more easily to their ideas in a specific space. *DNA* is set in three locations, and a model box design might help students to consider how these spaces could be created within several different stage spaces, either real or imagined.

Exploring different music and sound effects for key moments is another effective way of considering how design can play an important role in the development of a key idea or theme. For example, consider the sounds of the street/the field/the wood that might punctuate the narrative and support moments of tension or revelation. What theatrical impact is created when you explore the use of different sound effects at different volumes – sounds from the street, for example? Does music or sound effects underscore the key speeches – Leah and Phil for example, or Adam's story, or Jan and Mark's version of the events that led to his 'death'?

If you have access to different lighting effects, it might be useful to **explore key moments in different lighting states**. Kelly gives no instructions so this, for exploring the text, becomes something of a blank canvas. A lighting design could be either naturalistic or more abstract at moments during the play, or a combination of both. Although the play is set in three outdoor locations, the lighting state in your interpretation does not need to reflect this. You might consider symbolic lighting, for example, as the 'storm clouds' gather leading up to Adam's re-appearance and Phil's subsequent plotting. Researching previous productions and lighting designs to see how other theatre makers have used lighting to create impact is a useful activity. If access to lighting is limited, there are computer programmes available that will help you to create a virtual set and lighting grid for a production of the play.

Another useful design consideration is to look at the time of the play and **develop ideas for performance by sourcing and designing potential costumes**. Research is key and this will help those who are initially daunted about the thought of 'designing'. They don't have to be great artists to create great designs. The main thing is that they approach the design of the production in a holistic way. Is their costume design expressionistic, representational or more naturalistic? What is their aim and intention? Does their costume design root the production and performance in a particular time period or style? How does the performance of an actor playing Leah change when she wears a shirt and leggings instead of a skirt and top? It is always interesting for designers to interview performers and discover how costume can reveal insight into characterisation and interpretation. The play is set 'now', but that does not mean that costumes for each character should not be considered.

