



MERCURY

Teacher's Resource Pack

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Synopsis

Blackmail Synopsis

Adapted from Charles Bennett's popular West End drama, writer Mark Ravenhill follows the fortunes of Alice Jarvis, a young Surrey woman living at home and working in the family shop, and Harold, her boyfriend and Detective Constable.

After a spat with Harold, Alice accompanies another admirer—artist Peter Hewitt—to his flat, where after some mutual flirtation, Hewitt tries to rape her, and Alice stabs him to death in self-defense.

Blackmailer Ian Tracy thinks he knows the answers and that shop worker Alice and her policeman fiancée Harold are the perfect victims. Alice's fearsome mother Ada Jarvis is determined to find out the truth. A long night of secrets and lies awaits them all and before morning comes, one of them will be dead.

Harold threatens to blame the killing on Tracy, who flees, only to fall to his death. The story ends with the case closed, and Alice's secret safe (for now) with Harold.



Meet the Director

Anthony Banks

I've always enjoyed directing both new plays and old plays but I've never directed a new play which is based on an old play!

Usually if plays are adaptations, they're based on novels or films. *Blackmail* is based on a play that was very popular when first produced in the 1920s but has since become "a lost play".

When directing a new play, it's fascinating to explore uncharted territory with the actors and design team. When directing a classic, I often begin by researching the production history of the play. With this project, I'm doing both: two simultaneous, parallel journeys.

Mark and I have discussed the stories we'd like the show to contain which feel ripe for telling today. Charles Bennett's son has been generous in giving us open access to his father's papers, comprising diaries and correspondence between writer, actors, and of course, Alfred Hitchcock, who adapted the play into one of the first British talking pictures in 1929.

The moment in the story which caught my attention and imagination is when 19 year old Alice Jarvis is out dancing with her policeman fiancé and is dazzled and distracted by a bohemian stranger. On a hot summer night in a state of giddiness she makes a choice which tumbles her into a series of catastrophic consequences. Bennett wrote several drafts of *Blackmail* and one thing is constant in all of them: Alice's irreconcilable feelings of guilt. Charles Bennett wrote the first draft of the play when he was 25. The story is based on a true incident that happened to a young female friend of his in Chelsea. Tallulah Bankhead was the first to play Alice at the Globe (now called Gielgud) Theatre in London's West End. The show then toured extensively. Almost a century later, it's thrilling to bring Alice's story back to life in Colchester.



Interview with Writer Mark Ravenhill

How did you find your way to writing plays – was it something you always wanted to do?

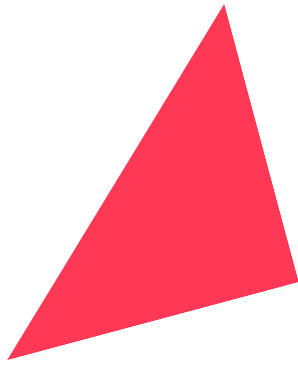
I always wanted to make plays. I didn't realise you needed a writer. From a very young age, I'd put on old clothes, hats and accessories I'd got hold of. I'd make scenery from cardboard, acting with glove puppets and string puppets, making little films with a cine camera. It was only later that I discovered that some people were actors, some directors, some playwrights. It's all the same job to me: theatre maker.

How did you become involved in the Blackmail project?

I've been a Hitchcock obsessive since I first saw Strangers on a Train when I was eighteen. I've got most of his films and watch them all regularly. He tells a story like no other film maker. I heard that the producer Simon Friend and director Anthony Banks were looking for a playwright to revisit the original play which was the source for the film Blackmail. I persuaded them to let me have a go at writing this new version.

How did you approach the adaptation process?

I wanted to focus and highlight the strengths of Charles Bennett's original play. He was a young actor when he wrote the play and it was one of his first pieces of dramatic writing. At several points in his career he returned to the play and continued rewriting it. He was working on a potential new film version towards the end of his life. In some ways, Blackmail was unfinished business for him. I've tried to imagine what he would do if he reworked the play for a contemporary audience.



We know you're an Alfred Hitchcock fan, did his film provide inspiration for your adaptation?

The Hitchcock film goes in the opposite direction from my adaptation. Hitchcock opens the play out with action and David Woodhead, Anthony Banks, Lucy Speed, Gabriel Akuwudike, Jessie Hills, Mark Ravenhill, Patrick Walshe McBride, Michael Cottrell & Helena Palmer chases. I've focussed on the taut and claustrophobic aspects of the play. This is mostly because of the media we're working in: film favours a lot of movement and changes of scene while the stage is a great place for people trapped in a room with a secret.

The original play had several endings, how did you approach coming up with a new ending?

The appeal of a thriller is that it traps the characters in a situation from which there seems no possible escape. The skill of the writer is finding an ending in which an escape from the situation suddenly appears, an escape which neither the characters or audiences could have anticipated. Charles Bennett had several different runs at this for Blackmail. I've magnified and developed one of his endings. Poster for Hitchcock's Blackmail (1928) Anny Ondra (Alice) in the Blackmail Film.

Further reading:

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2022/feb/22/mark-ravenhill-on-blackmail-hitchcock-charles-bennett>



In conversation with Jessie Hills & Lucy Speed

Can you describe your character in *Blackmail*?

Jessie: My character is Alice Jarvis. She's a 19-year-old girl who is ambitious, sharp and strong-willed, who dreams of escaping the family business in London and living a better life on the south coast. It's set during a very poignant time in history as the voting age for women was lowered from 30 to 21 years old, this was a huge milestone for young women. Alice also represents the young women during this time that started to dream bigger and find their own independence.

Lucy: My character is Ada Jarvis, she's a middle-aged woman who is trying desperately to live a decent life and to prevent her daughter from making the mistakes she made. Like we all do with Students, she's just trying to help her child better herself. She's very hard-working but she carries around a lot of guilt for things that happened in her past and it's important to note that these are things we wouldn't even think twice about if they happened today.

What do you think are the themes that resonate most for women in this play?

J: I think young women in the audience will identify with this piece as it explores women experiencing sexual misconduct or abuse and the abuse of power and injustice that women face which unfortunately is still part of society today. Despite it being set almost 100 years ago, the themes of the play are still very much apparent, especially due to what we have seen in the news with the Sarah Everard and Sabina Nessa cases.

L: The themes that resonate most for women in this play are equality, safety, the expectations of society and where responsibility is placed for certain acts. It also really delves into the fact that women are almost expected to think one step ahead, just to live their lives safely and I think all of those things are still really prevalent today when we think about recent cases.

If Blackmail was set in 2022, how different do you think your character's responses would be to the violence against them?

J: I think the biggest difference would be that there is a lot more help and understanding out there for young women who have experienced the violence and abuse that Alice has gone through and in 1928 that just didn't exist. I hope having the support and outlets that are available today would give Alice the strength to seek help to aid her in her recovery from the trauma that she has experienced. I would also hope that in 2022 the voice of the survivor/ Alice would be heard and she would feel confident enough to seek help from those around her and those in positions of power.

L: I do think she'd still be shocked, as it's not something that happens every day. I wanted to say she'd be less surprised, but actually I don't think Ada is surprised. Ada was born in 1888, which was around the same time as Jack the Ripper, so violence towards women, really has always been there and I think that it's something that women deal with quietly without really having made it men's problem. I'm not really sure what can be done, it poses all those questions and it's quite sad that all of this has been going on forever, when will it end? How will it end? What do we do? We're stuck and for the meantime that responsibility is firmly on women's shoulders.

Do you think theatre – such as this production of Blackmail – has a role to play in changing the dialogue about women and women's safety?

J: I think that plays such as Blackmail do have the power to shine a light on topics that many may shy away from, due to the nature of the abuse Alice has gone through, it forces the audience to think about such sensitive topics. The play is set in 1928, which sadly shows a lack of positive progression in this area for women and the voice of the survivor, as survivors still worry about not being believed or listened to. Which is why theatre is a good way to spark conversations and also for others to learn and educate themselves on experiences that they perhaps haven't gone through.

L: It absolutely has a role to play, we need to keep having an open dialogue about it but at the moment it feels like we're at an impasse, it seems like we don't really know how to change things, does it come via harsher laws, does it come via upbringing and social conditioning, does it come via women being even more aware of their safety? I think very definitely we need to stop putting the responsibility on women and pass it on to the culprits. I think as Students we absorb a lot of our surroundings so we need to be more aware of what we're showing them, what we glamourise, how we teach Students about empathy, love and intimacy. There's a huge ship to turn around, but it doesn't mean we can't start somewhere.



Meet the Cast



BLACKMAIL

Gabriel Akuwudike
Harold

Jessie Hills
Alice

Patrick Walshe McBride
Ian Tracy

Lucy Speed
Ada

MERCURY

Fri 4 - Sat 19 Mar

Meet the creative team

Writer: Charles Bennett
Adapted by: Mark Ravenhill
Director: Anthony Banks
Designer: david Woodhead
Lighting Designer: Howard Hudson
Sound Designer: Ben Ringham/Max
Ringham
Fight Director: Alsion DeBurgh
Choreographer: Arielle Smith
Casting: Helena Palmer
Assistant Director: Michael Cottrell



In rehearsals





Secondary Activities



Lesson #1: Drama as practical art



Curriculum Links: Drama & English Literature

Time: 30-40 mins

Resources: pens and paper

Objective:

- Explore performance texts, understanding their social, cultural and historical context including the theatrical conventions of the period in which they were created
- Reflect on and evaluate their own work and that of others
- Develop a range of theatrical skills and apply them to create performances

Recognising drama as a practical art

Use this exercise to develop students' awareness of how drama is used to represent thoughts and emotions through practical, visual and auditory mediums.

This exercise will provide an opportunity to deepen students' engagement with performance and provide the opportunity for open discussion aimed at provoking critical analysis of performance.

Whilst watching and enjoying a live performance it can be easy to overlook the deliberate and often obscured details used to evoke an emotional response in the audience.

It's time for our students to delve deeper into a performance and really engage with it as a thought-provoking display of theatrical nuances.

Lesson #1:

Task 1

Unpicking the scene...

With the text provided have a look at how the characters interact with each other. Bring students' attention to the following:

- Who is the most dominant?
- Who has the most stage presence?
- Who do they liken themselves to most?
- What elements of the scene can they relate to through experiences in their own life.

For each of the above points, ask students to justify their answer as best they can and encourage the class to argue in agreement or otherwise.

Task 2

Expressing thoughts and justifying beliefs:

Pose the statement " the pivotal point in the play is when Harold shoots Ian Tracy to frame Ian and keep Alice in the clear"

Split the class in 2. Group A must prepare arguments for this statement being correct, Group B must argue against it. Students stand on the opposite end of the room and take it in turns to propose their argument. Students may switch teams after each argument point if they wish.

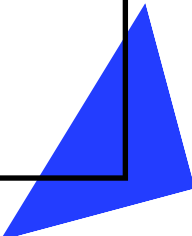
Repeat this exercise allowing the class to nominate 3 or 4 potential pivotal points in the play. Encourage students to reflect on, stage position, the tempo of speech, silence, deeper meaning of words, relationships that may be changing etc.

Curriculum Links: English, Drama & History

Time: 40 minutes

Resources: Open space, script

Lesson #2: Adapting a performance



Objective:

- Explore performance texts, understanding their social, cultural and historical context including the theatrical conventions of the period in which they were created
- Reflect on and evaluate their own work and that of others
- Develop a range of theatrical skills and apply them to create performances

Blackmail is set in the 1920s but how would this play have changed if it were set in today's modern society? What conflicts and problems might the characters need to overcome? How might their choice of vocabulary differ? Would the relationships between characters remain the same, similar or would some need to be rethought and remodelled altogether?

This activity will allow young people to reflect on how a play is adapted in order to engage different audiences.

Students will consider a chosen audience relating to background, age etc. They will then recreate a scene showing how they would adapt it for a modern setting.

Task 1

- Recap on the scene (the same as task 1)
- Discuss the characters at length and record their traits in view of the class. Consider the context of the scene, what clues are there to show the time period? Are they effective? Could they have been improved?
- Share the task with the group

Task 2

- “Today we will be adapting this scene into one which would be fitting of a modern society”
- Discuss necessary changes and how these might look.
- Give students time to write down adaptations to the script and to rehearse their scene in groups.
- Each group should share their scene with the class. The class should then provide feedback with a specific focus on the adaptations which were successful and where further improvements could be made.

Act 2: Final Scene

MRS JARVIS bangs on the door from upstairs.

MRS JARVIS: (off) Alice! Alice!

ALICE: I'm not going to let you do it.

MRS JARVIS: (off) Alice! ALICE grabs the gun.

TRACY: He's not such a catch now is he your policeman? A man who says that the oath is nothing, that murder can be covered up with murder, who's prepared to shoot me to crush the truth. That's not much of a man with whom to spend the rest of your days. Even if they do make him a detective inspector. There was an altogether different possibility. Too late now but ...I fancy that life on the continent would have suited us so much better.

TRACY throws a chair which sends HAROLD falling backwards. TRACY grabs the bread knife and with an animal roar advances on HAROLD. ALICE raises the gun.

ALICE: Stop where you are! TRACY stops.

ALICE: And drop the knife. He does.

TRACY: Well, Miss Jarvis. The power is all yours. Now you can choose. Do I live or die? One squeeze of the trigger and I'm gone.

MRS JARVIS: (off) Alice! Alice!

HAROLD: Give me the gun!

ALICE: No.

HAROLD: He's resisting arrest. Give me the gun!

ALICE: I won't let you kill him.

TRACY lunges at ALICE to grab the gun but HAROLD pulls him away. TRACY lands a punch on HAROLD. HAROLD grabs the gun and turns on TRACY. TRACY hurls himself at HAROLD. Their bodies tight together, wrestling for control of the gun. A shot is fired. It's unclear at first who shot who until finally TRACY falls to the floor dead. Silence for a moment as ALICE and HAROLD stand apart, looking at the corpse. The door from upstairs is forced open and MRS JARVIS enters the parlour.

ADA: Alice! Oh you're safe! ADA cradles ALICE.

ADA: When I heard the gun ...

ALICE: He's dead?

HAROLD: Died resisting arrest.

HAROLD searches through TRACY's pockets until he finds ALICE's gloves.

HAROLD: Back to their rightful owner. He hands the gloves to ALICE.

HAROLD: What you going to do Alice? You're not going to tell them you killed Hewitt?

ALICE: He said we were a triangle. You me and him. Only now there's only two points of the triangle left. What I'd like to do is go back to before I met Peter Hewitt, Ian Tracy, before you pulled out the gun and said 'a murder for a murder'.

HAROLD: Don't.

ALICE: Because you're right I was a child. Twenty fours ago. But now.

HAROLD: What?

ALICE: Everything's different.

HAROLD: All you have to do is keep quiet. We'll get married. I'll be made detective inspector. We'll have babies. Whatever you want. A happy life.

ALICE: Built on a lie.

HAROLD: Don't be a fool Alice. Save yourself. Save me. You're frightening me now. For god's sake Alice just keep your stupid mouth shut!

ADA: That's enough Harold. Let Alice decide.

HAROLD: But –

ADA: Enough! (to ALICE) I'll stand by you. Always. Banging on door.

VOICE: (off) Police! Open up!

ADA: Well Alice, what do you want to do?

END