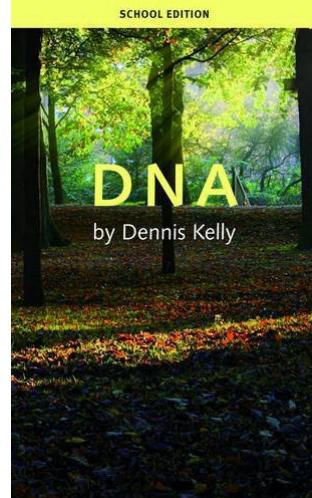


# DNA

BY DENNIS KELLY



Dennis Kelly, who was born in 1970, wrote his first play, *Debris*, when he was 30. He is now an internationally acclaimed playwright and has written for film, television and theatre. Perhaps Dennis Kelly is best known for co-writing BBC Three's sitcom *Pulling* with actress Sharon Horgan and *Matilda the Musical* with comedian Tim Minchin, and for the controversial Channel 4 conspiracy thriller *Utopia*.



## INTRODUCTION TO DNA

The play *DNA* was first staged in 2007 at the National Theatre before going on national tour for the first time. It's a play about a group of teenagers, who could be described as a 'gang', who have accidentally killed one of their classmates. When they realize the terrible mistake they have made, they try to cover up this crime, but inadvertently implicate an innocent man in the process. At each moment when they could come clean, the group instead weaves a darker, more complex web of lies.

**When asked what inspired him to write DNA, the author Dennis Kelly answered:**

“ Oddly it was to do with western foreign policy. At the time, people were becoming increasingly scared of terrorism (as they are now). I felt our fear meant we were in danger (as we are now) of over-reacting and curbing our own liberties and the liberties of others. So I began to ask myself whether it was right to sacrifice the individual for the many – this for me is the central question in the play. It’s not about bullying or anything like that, as the real bullying takes place before the play starts. What the characters are struggling with in the play itself are questions of how far they should go to protect the group – how many wrong things you can do for a greater purpose.



So they start off with what seems like a relatively small wrong thing; they create an elaborate lie about what happened to Adam. Phil does this to protect all these scared people around him – the many. But as the play goes on, the wrongs they have to do become bigger and bigger. They need to create bigger lies, to implicate another person in a crime, to intimidate and threaten, to turn a blind eye to violence and ultimately to murder. In the end the group has become terrifying, as has Phil at its centre – but I don’t think he starts out that way.”

The play has been described in many different ways. One reviewer described it as a tragicomedy. However, the author in one interview said that he didn't like that description. How would Dennis Kelly himself describe his own play?

“ Well I don't think modern plays tend to fall into such easy categories as they used to. Often plays have humour in them but are tragic at the same time. I think there is humour in *DNA* but if you call it a comedy that is the element that comes out more in our minds. It takes away from the more tragic elements and makes them feel slightly glib – after all, a child dies and that is not funny. Equally, if you called it a tragedy, the humour would suffer. I think the nice thing about theatre these days is that plays don't need to be categorized, they can just be.. ”

## THE STRUCTURE OF THE PLAY

The play has been constructed with a cyclical narrative. The structure repeats itself and when we read the play we come to realize that there is a pattern to the sequence of the different scenes – and to the three different locations. For example, the first scene is always Mark and Jan in A Street, who introduce the problem of that particular section. Then it's Leah and Phil, before moving on to a greater scene with everyone where the problem is solved. This sequence is repeated throughout the play and below is an overview in order to see the exact structure of the play.

## Section 1 - The Problem

### Scenes

1 pp. 9–10	2 pp. 10–12	3 pp. 12–26	4 pp. 26–8
A Street	A Field	A Wood	A Field
Jan Mark	Leah Phil	Lou John Tate Danny * Richard Cathy Brian * Mark Jan Leah Phil	Leah Phil

## Section 2 - Framing the Postman

### Scenes

5 pp. 29–30	6 pp. 30–2	7 pp. 33–41	8 pp. 41–3
A Street	A Field	A Wood	A Field
Jan Mark	Leah Phil	Phil Leah Lou Danny * Richard Cathy * Jan Mark Brian	Leah Phil

## Section 3 -

The climax; Adam lives and dies

### Scenes

9 pp. 44–6	10 pp. 46–8	11 pp. 48–60	12 p. 61
A Street	A Field	A Wood	A Field
Jan Mark	Phil Leah Jan Mark	Cathy Brian Leah Mark Lou Jan ADAM Phil	Leah Phil

## Section 4

The resolution –Life goes on

### Scenes

13 pp. 62–3	14 pp. 63–6
A Street	A Field
Jan Mark	Richard Phil

## THEMES

The play contains a number of different themes. One of the obvious ones is **Bullying** and the most obvious character who is bullied is Adam. He is desperate to be a member of the group and thus becomes an easy target for the bullies. His bullying is so severe that at the start of the play we believe that this has led to his death. Even when he returns alive at the end of the play he is not spared from further bullying. This eventually leads to his death for the 'second time'. It is worth considering who the main bullies are in the play and the different types of bullying e.g. verbal, mental and physical.

Another theme is **Gangs**. The group of characters in the play can be described as a 'gang'. Adam is not the only one desperate to be a member of the 'gang'. We witness a few of the characters who, in their own way, want to be accepted as a member of the gang. They are willing to do things that they don't really want to in order to 'belong'. Linked with this theme of gangs is **Power**, because within the gang there are continuous power struggles. It's worth considering who has the power at different stages of the play. It's also interesting to remember that it is Cathy who ultimately takes on the role of gang leader at the end of the play.

Other themes to consider are **Responsibility**, **Violence**, **Fear** and **Friendship**.

## THE CHARACTERS

There are eleven characters in the play: Mark and Jan; Leah and Phil; Lou, John Tate and Danny; Richard; Cathy and Brian and a boy (Adam). However, although the author has given the characters names and gender, he has made a note allowing performers to change names and gender to suit their own preference. The character traits and the moral choices they make are more important than a name.

As we see from the overview above, **Jan and Mark** appear together at the beginning of each section. They act as narrators or as a 'Greek chorus' and throw the audience directly into the action at the beginning of each section. They are also used to fill in any blanks for us and make us aware of any new developments in the story. Their scenes follow the same pattern each

time: they introduce a ‘teasing’ idea of what has happened but leave us curious. They are used to hook the interest of the audience. They speak very short sentences – often one word each, constantly interrupting each other. They repeat phrases the other one has said and they never really create proper, full sensible sentences. The actors portraying these characters must take all this into consideration because the pace of their scenes is important. Any delay between words or phrases could make their scenes very uninteresting to the audience. Yet they must make sure that as a ‘chorus’ they make things clear to the audience.

**Leah** and **Phil** are another pair of characters who always appear together. Leah is the talkative one and Phil is the character who doesn’t say anything in scenes where they are together, but just eats. Leah obviously adores Phil but he just ignores her. He doesn’t respond verbally to what she says which results in Leah having long speeches or monologues. The actress portraying Leah faces a challenge to make these long monologues interesting to the audience. She repeats a lot, jumps from topic to topic, asks Phil rhetorical questions and answers her own questions. This means that the actress must use her vocal skills to the full. She must consider pace, pitch, volume and pauses. She has to consider the different moods conveyed in her long monologues. It would help the learners if they were given one of Leah’s monologues to study and learn and then in turn present it in front of the other members of the class.

**Phil** on the other hand is the silent one, especially in the scenes with Leah. The stage directions make it clear that he eats a lot: *Phil eating an ice cream; Phil opens his bag of crisps and begins to eat them etc.* This character again is a challenge to any young actor. Because he doesn’t say anything in the scenes with Leah, the actor must act with his body and his facial expressions. The author doesn’t give him many stage directions as far as movement is concerned e.g. Phil shrugs (p. 32) Phil looks up (p. 32). It’s up to the actor then to decide on his movements and facial expressions when Leah rants on and on in her monologues in front of him. It’s significant that Phil doesn’t eat in the final scene – which possibly suggests that he really misses Leah! Although silent in the scenes between him and Leah, Phil can be a powerful figure when he is with the other characters. They listen to him and seem frightened of him. In these scenes he has a controlling and reassuring body language. Here the stage directions for him are more specific, e.g. when answering Lou’s question on page 57 about Cathy, the stage directions state: *Phil goes to her. Places a hand on her shoulder, smiles, warm, reassuring.*

**John Tate** only appears in one scene – Scene 3 Section 1. When we first see him he appears to be the leader of the group. This doesn't last long and his leadership is challenged. He becomes very stressed and is visibly falling apart during this scene. It is obvious from his mannerisms, from his words, from his interaction with the other characters that he feels incredibly guilty by the death of Adam. He even tries to ban the word 'death'. An actor playing this character must be aware of his stress and insecurity following threatening and aggressive behaviour at the start of the play.

**Cathy** finds the whole situation exciting and 'better than ordinary life' (p. 16). She is excited rather than horrified by the police investigation. She seems to enjoy conflict and is a cruel and disturbed character who at the end is prepared to kill Adam. She is capable of violence and cruelty towards others e.g. the way she slaps Brian.

**Brian** is the weakest link in the group. The other characters must see him as such and someone the police could believe to be a victim of the 'fake man'. He is the only character to cry and it's obvious that he's visibly affected by Adam's death.

**Lou** is another follower – she swears a lot and again panics over Adam's death. Although she is on stage a lot, she is often quiet. This will be a challenge to the actress because, as with some of the others, her body language and facial expressions are important as a response to what is said and happening around her. She is easily manipulated.

**Danny** is intelligent but is a follower. He is disturbed by Adam's death and is terrified that it will affect his future – he wants to be a dentist. He repeats a lot and seems to have a one-track mind.

**Adam** does not appear physically until Section 3. When he appears it is a massive shock to the others that he is still alive. The stage directions describe his appearance thus:

“ His clothes are torn and dirty and his hair is matted with dried blood from an old gash in his forehead that has not been cleaned up. He stands there, twitchily, staring at them as though they are aliens and it looks as though he might run off at any moment. ”

# DNA

By DENNIS KELLY

The actor playing this part must consider that Adam is the victim, he is weak, he is desperate, lonely and bullied. When he does appear, the actor must remember that his speech is confused and staggered.

**Richard** seems to be a responsible character and when we first meet him he appears to have the potential to be a leader. He is completely missing from Section 3 and when he appears in the final scene it seems that he has now taken the place of Leah as narrator.

## THE STAGING OF THE PLAY

There are three different locations in the play – all of them outdoors; the street, the field and the wood. The scenes in the street are rather short. In these scenes the audience are made aware of what has been happening and are prepared for what will happen in the group scenes. Because they are short, the set must be minimal for a quick change of scenery before we move into the field and then into the wood.

The author has avoided making any references to the staging of the play:

**“**I have deliberately written it so that there are many staging options. Theatre is a very collaborative art form. Part of my job is to create the circumstances where other people can come in and use their own creativity as much as I've been allowed to use mine, whether they are actors, directors, design, sound or lighting. When I wrote it I saw a field, a wood and a street, as that's where the characters were.**”**

The learners could be asked to experiment with different types of staging and decide what

# DNA

By DENNIS KELLY

works best. Would the play, for example, work on a thrust stage with a different background to depict the different locations? On the other hand, it could be staged in the round with special lighting and sound effects to depict the locations. The wood, for example, is a suitable setting for the group scenes. Woods tend to be dark, mysterious and isolated and this complements the discussions that the group have in the woods – discussions about things that should be hidden from the outside world. The group's attempt at a cover-up of the crime is reflected in this setting of a wood, where the trees would make it easy for them to hide. This kind of setting would be a challenge to the lighting designer to suggest the horrific and threatening behaviour of the group.

**In conclusion,** the author was asked if he wanted the audience to learn something after watching a performance of *DNA* on stage. He replied:

“Not really, to be honest. I tend to write plays around a moral question that confuses me – it's generally something I don't have the answer to. So the play is often as much a way of me asking things as it is for the actors or the audience. I don't really feel I can teach people things, especially not about morality as I'm not any more or less moral than the next person. When writing a play, rather than trying to teach or preach, I think you have to try to be as honest as you can – that alone is hard enough.”

# DNA

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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