

Theatre

EXAMPLE SOURCE: Ruth Barnett, *What Price for Justice?*

Barnett’s play addresses directly the impact of the Holocaust and the Kindertransport on families and raises important questions about perpetrators and the search for justice after 1945.

Act II, Scene 7 of *What Price for Justice?* is provided with the kind permission of the author in the resource pack. The author is also happy to send email attachments of the original script and later versions to any teacher who asks (contact: rutheclb@gmail.com). She can also post a copy of the print version of the book for a small charge. Her book about the play and how/why she wrote it is available to purchase online: Ruth Barnett, *Why War? A Memoir in Honour of my Parents – A Kindertransport Tale* (independently published in 2019).

Key Considerations

- ❖ Theatre can be considered a form of testimony in diverse ways. In the case of the example source, it is a play written by a Kindertransportee about her own experiences and those of her family. Other plays are based on the testimonies of survivors, but are written by someone else (who functions as a “secondary witness”). Such works may contain elements that are more or less fictionalised. There also exist a number of works in which the witnesses themselves are present on stage to recount their stories. The play *And then they came for me: Remembering the world of Anne Frank* (James Still, 1999) does this to great effect by combining video accounts by survivors with stage performance by actors following a script. Any use of theatre as a form of testimony needs to be sensitive to the particular way in which the experiences of survivors are mediated.
- ❖ Theatre can be treated as text and examined as such, particularly in the context of the English literature curriculum. In this way, it can be examined for thematic concerns – in the case of the source text this would include questions of justice, reconciliation and family. Nonetheless, as with literature, we would not recommend abstracting this discussion from the historical context, which should be taught alongside any literary analysis in order to avoid misconceptions.
- ❖ Theatre is – for the most part – written to be performed. Performing a testimony can promote detailed understanding of and empathy with the experiences of the witness, as the performer embodies the person who gave the original testimony. Role play is quite literally the point of the task. This raises concerns about the kind of empathy that is generated and the risk of over-identification, emotional overloading, and a lack of critical distance (see **Research Briefing I**). If teachers choose to perform a play based on testimony, they should include strategies to mitigate this.
- ❖ The nature of theatre should also be kept in mind if students are watching a performance (rather than performing

themselves). The embodiment of survivors by actors can be productive in “making it real” and encouraging identification; however, it can also blur distinctions between actor and witness and fiction and reality.

- ❖ With regard to the example source, the special considerations regarding teaching the Holocaust through **Family Frames** and the particular nature of the testimony of those who came to the UK on the Kindertransport should be taken into account (see **Research Briefing II**).

Starting Point

Before engaging with the text, students should be introduced to the historical background of the rise of Nazism and the Kindertransport to the UK. At a minimum, we would recommend spending 2 lessons on this background before engaging with the text. There are numerous excellent resources for teaching the Kindertransport and its context. We would especially recommend the Holocaust Educational Trust’s resource pack, *Britain, Refugees and the Kindertransport*, which draws on diverse kinds of testimony, as well as historical sources (aimed at KS4 and above – see access details in the **Resources List**). The “Memories of the Kindertransport” sheet produced by HET for use in the lesson includes information about Barnett, the author of *What Price for Justice*. This allows an easy link to be made with the play. Note also that HET’s resources provide a structured way to address issues around antisemitism in Britain at the time.

Alternative materials on the Kindertransport can be found in the **Resources List** below. See also HMD’s Drama Lesson Plan, which explores the

use of drama techniques without re-enactment of traumatic situations (<https://www.hmd.org.uk/resource/holocaust-memorial-day-drama-lesson-plan/>).

Source Engagement

As noted above, the play can be explored as a work of literature and studied with regard to its core themes without necessarily performing the material: Such themes include, justice, reconciliation, and the legacy of Nazi persecution for families.

However, the full effect of theatre as a medium is only seen when the play is performed. If you choose to produce the full-length play with your students, we would recommend that this be part of a longer term and possibly cross-curricula project in which they are given space to explore the historical context (e.g., within the history curriculum) *and* the thematic concerns of the text (e.g., within the English curriculum). This will ensure that students taking on the roles of the protagonists are consistently encouraged to take a step back from those roles, maintain a critical distance to the text and – whilst empathising with the characters – recognise that this story is not *their* story. Consider also the kind of staging that you would like to work with. A realist/naturalist aesthetic draws the audience in; however, more abstract or symbolic staging can be productive in terms of promoting critical distance and highlighting the nature of theatre as a medium.

If time is limited, *What Price for Justice?* lends itself well to being delivered focusing only on one or several shorter extracts. The same principles as for a full-length performance apply – students

should be engaged with the historical context, as well as with the thematic concerns of the text. We would suggest in particular that Act II, Scene 7 can be taught within a single class. This scene stages the first meeting of Ruth and her brother Martin with their mother after the end of the War. In this regard, it could form the basis of a follow-on lesson, delivered after students have engaged with the material provided by HET (see above) and drawing on the ideas presented in **Research Briefing II** around **Family Frames**.

What Price for Justice: Act II, Scene 7

August 1949. The lights come on showing a waiting room in Haslemere railway station. Three people are sitting there, waiting for a train. Martin (17) wears long trousers and Ruth (14) wears shorts, both with short-sleeved tops. Phylis Hosking wears a tweed skirt and long-sleeved blouse. There is tense silence. Phylis sits upright and still, her thoughts far away. Both children fidget and look very uncomfortable.

Ruth: (*hopefully*) Perhaps she is not coming after all. Perhaps she doesn't actually exist. She died in the war.

Martin: Don't be daft, Ruth! The train is just a little bit late. Of course she is coming – she wrote a letter didn't she, Mrs Hosking?

Phylis: (*coming out of her reverie*) Yes, she did. I gave you the letter to read.

Ruth: (*angrily*) I never saw any letter.

Martin: You didn't want to know, when I showed it to you.

Ruth: (*impetuously*) I don't want her to come. I want to be out in the field with the others, bringing the harvest in. It's my job to lead the horse home with the loaded wagon and then drive the next empty wagon out to the field.

Martin: I am sure they'll manage without you, Sis.

Phylis: (*kindly*) You can go out to the field later, Ruth. She is your mother and she has come a long way to see you.

Ruth: She hasn't come for 10 years, so why should she come now? I am happy on the farm, with the animals. I don't want her coming to change my life. And there is no way I'm going to Germany. If I can't stay here with you, I'll run away and find another farm with horses.

Martin: Don't be so daft, Ruth, running away won't solve anything.

Phylis: You know we love you and consider you part of the family, but you have parents too.

Ruth: They didn't come and didn't come – and now I don't want them to come!

(Sounds off-stage of a steam engine slowing down and stopping)

Martin: Too bad, Sis! She's coming.

All three get up. Ruth tries to run behind Phylis, who gently pushes her out towards the exit onto the platform. Martin and Ruth stand facing the back of the stage, where the platform is. Sounds of crowds getting off the train gradually peter out.

Ruth: She's not coming. Can we go home now?

Phylis: Not yet, Ruth, we shall have to find out when the next train will come. She may have missed the train.

Louise enters from the side of the stage, elegantly dressed with a small suitcase. Both children turn towards her, confused and stare speechless. Louise looks at them, smiling, as if she can't believe what she is seeing.

Louise: Malu! Ruthchen! You have grown so tall. *(She takes a few steps forward. Ruth backs away frightened. Martin stays stock-still. Phylis steps up to Louise with her hand out.)*

Phylis: Welcome to Sussex, Frau Michaelis. *(She shakes hands with Louise.)*

Louise: Thank you, Mrs Hosking, for bringing the children to meet me. *(She holds her arms out to Martin and Ruth. Ruth backs away further. Martin stays still and allows her to embrace him, but he is not comfortable. Tears roll down Louise's cheeks.)*

Martin: *(pulling away to arm's length)* Mutti! Why did you leave us so long? Ruth thought you were dead and that our father would bring us to China – as far away from Germany as you can get.

Louise: *(softly, and getting softer until her voice becomes inaudible)* I couldn't leave Germany once the war started. Believe me, I wanted to come and take you to Shanghai. It wasn't possible. The Nazis took everything away – I had no money – nothing – nothing ... and ... *(she pulls herself together physically and emotionally)*. But now your father is back home from Shanghai. He has a good job as a judge in Mainz. We can all be together again as a family in Mainz.

Martin: *(very seriously, with Ruth and Phylis looking on puzzled)* I don't think that is going to work. Ruth is off her rocker. She is terrified of Germany. She has some romantic

idea about China, but I don't think she would go anywhere at all and leave her beloved horses.

Louise: But we are your parents. I have been searching for you every day since the war ended. We have to get our family back and Germany is a different place now – it is safe there now. The Nazis have been beaten. We are all needed, all four of us, to help build up a better Germany.

Ruth: I'm not going to Germany – no way! Germany kicked me out and I'm not going back – not ever! The Hoskings are my family, and all the animals too. The animals need me more than Germany does.

Martin: Don't be daft, Sis. There are plenty of animals in Germany too.

Louise: It isn't about animals – it's about us – our family – we need to be together again. And in Germany. Germany is our home. Hitler took it away from us. We must claim it back and make it our home again.

At this, Ruth rushes out and Phylis goes out after her. Martin shrugs. Louise is obviously uncertain what to do.

Martin: *(matter-of-factly)* We'd better go after them. We can't stay here.

The exit together and the lights go off.