

A YOUTH PRESUMED

by FINEGAN KRUCKEMEYER

A response to:

Blackrock

by Nick Enright



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Author's Biography



FINEGAN KRUCKEMEYER has had 71 commissioned plays performed on five continents and translated into five languages.

To date, Finegan's work has enjoyed seasons in: over 70 international festivals; six US national tours; six UK national tours; all Australian states/territories; and at the Sydney Opera House, New York's New Victory Theater, Edinburgh's Imagination Festival, Dublin's Abbey Theatre, Shanghai's Malan Flower Theatre, and DC's Kennedy Center.

Finegan and his work have received (among others) the 2012 Helpmann Award for Children's Theatre, 2011 Sidney Myer Creative Fellowship, 2010 Rodney Seaborn Award, 2009 AWGIE Award (Best Australian Children's Play), 2008 Oscart (Best Children's Playwright), 2007 Oscart (Best Playwright), 2006 Jill Blewett Award, and 2002 Colin Thiele Scholarship.

Finegan was Keynote Speaker at the 2013 One Theatre World North American TYA conference, and has spoken at conferences/festivals in Argentina, Australia, Austria, Denmark, England, Scotland, Sweden and the US, with essays published and his work studied in several US universities.

He currently sits on the Australian Script Centre board, and Arts Tasmania's Assistance to Individuals, Tasmanian Literary Awards, and Artsbridge panels. He is committed to making strong and respectful work for children, which acknowledges them as astute audience members outside the plays, and worthy subjects within.

Finegan lives in Tasmania with his wife Essie.

A YOUTH PRESUMED

The first notion that comes to my mind upon studying *Blackrock*—and so recalling a production on stage, and the 1997 film—is that of presumption.

Not so much on the part of its writing (Nick Enright created a robust and captivating work of drama, which has aged well), but rather in the presumption elicited by the play and film's presentation, and in our own responses to this as audience members. The presumption, in my mind, is one of the culpability of teenagehood, and the oft-held association for many of us (as adults, as teenagers also) between adolescence and roles of perpetrator or victim.

It begins for me when reading the blurb on the back of the published play, and learning of the impending: 'a young girl is dead—she's been raped by three boys and bashed with a rock'. It is grotesque, unapologetic content—and those responsible? They are unnamed but about to be met. So I enter into this read of the script with my presumptions at the ready. Three boys will do something heinous, and each time my eye alights upon a male name I scrutinise him for moral weakness. A young girl is dead—the book holds three, and from page one I am fearful for each.

And so, from this opening gambit (met not within the play, but within its contextualising) the work moves from social drama into the realm of thriller, a word which has a troubling etymological history—to 'thrill' is to elicit a quiver or tremble which comes with a discomfiting realisation, and it is this with which one might best associate the genre. But the other meaning of thrill (the one more commonly correlated by our ear) is that of pleasure, delight, enrapture. It is a troubling appropriation of meaning and I commence, ready to be thrilled, but not thrilled.

And what occurs in my mind is an equation, an equating of one thing with another, in a fashion that damns not an individual but a

population. I look upon the young ensemble with fear—with fear of the brutality of their men, with fear for the vulnerability of their women. And in doing so, I echo the sentiments so common when considering teenagers—and judge an entire age group which is by and large too early in its life to warrant a judiciary. This is a societal irony, I think—that we adults who arguably possess a larger array of rights and wrongs given more life lived, would assess so cynically those who have less.

In the case of *Blackrock*, the emotional and moral terrain referred to within this culture of almost-men is damning in its starkness. Empathy across the gender divide is a hard-won and near invisible thing. For his leading role in the rape (with apologies for spoilers to those not yet acquainted with the work), Toby's guilt is expressed not with articulated remorse, but rather silence—his absence of voice in the wake of the tragedy seems the closest he can come to culpability and sympathy. The other young men, save one, retain their dehumanising take on the female victim to the end, actually building in vitriol the longer the wake of her death.

He who doesn't so starkly follow this trend (the protagonist, Jared) still battles hard to restrain his own empathy, and really only succumbs to it after every other emotional response is exhausted. Despite silently carrying guilt all the way through—as he later reveals his own complicity in witnessing the rape—Jared's reconciliation with it is a long battle, and even in his final symbolic apology to the murdered young woman, his action is clearly articulated as that of the lone contradicter to the male culture he has formerly resided within. This final cleaning of the gravestone is not so much emblematic of the burgeoning morality of his culture, but rather it serves to signify more strongly (in the absence of male collegialism) the fact that he is the exception to the rule, a slowly softening male in an otherwise unforgiving landscape.

It must also be stated that—as so often happens with depictions of teenagers—the young men are seen to be products of their lineage, as well as free agents, so it cannot be said that adults escape the

same scrutiny. The men particularly are either (like Toby's father) upper-middle class misogynists who work in an unnamed industry that demeans women, or unflinching brutes (as in the case of Jared's) whose paternal advice entails not dobbing on another man, while also having enough self-preservation not to incriminate oneself. In both instances, their moral compasses are violently askew, in almost complete ambivalence towards the victim. The one redemptive male adult figure is a new man on the scene who, we come to understand quickly, is sweet and dependable and a little bit silly, a considered contravention of the masculine types so far encountered. But in these depictions of the black and white, there was in my reading a wish for the grey, for that middle ground of patriarchy, which is the quintessentially human, flawed but ever-evolving man.

As to the women, there is a richer breadth of takes on female self-regard, with some (like Cherie and Rachel) unswayed by the misogynist maelstrom they exist within and actively railing against it, others (Marian, Rachel's mum) acquiescing but knowing the flaws in what they see, others still (Tiffany, Ricko's girlfriend) motivated by fear and seemingly unable to change their state—until a final redemptive flourish which suggests old patterns may be ended. For the most part, however, these characters are reactive beings and if the Bechdel test were to be employed within this play, it would show this to be a landscape shaped by men.¹

The two adult sisters (Diane and Glenys) are for me the most interesting in their various takes on the gender roles played throughout their community. Glenys would honour her sister's birthday with a journey to a strip joint, in a considered mirroring of the sexual voyeurism of the men's world. Diane, however, must contend with her own tragedy (and one of heightened femininity in the form of an impending mastectomy). And so there runs a peripheral narrative throughout the work—though of course not, as it is a continuation of how womanhood might be kept, and lost, and found again (if one can please forgive the presumption of a male essayist writing about this).

These sisters speak as women, in conversations about women. One raises a boy and one a girl, and both voice corresponding concerns. They are, for me, that which is lacking in their male counterparts—flawed but ever-evolving figures of influence, in both their strengths and follies. And the final symbolism of Diane presenting her most maternal and feminine physiology to her son as a means of finally inducing an empathetic release in him is both beautiful and strong.

And so this world of teenagers—and the parents they possess, and the codes of a surfing culture they employ, and the rituals they stumble through, and the landscape they claim ownership of (despite being claimed by it in the fatalism of class and place; it is truly deserving as the work's titular character), and the harsh grotesqueries they encounter and cause and must heal from—plays out in front of us.

And it is no bad thing that this demographic has been chosen to represent this particular tale. But it is of concern when teenagers (as characters within a work, or as viewers of one) must tread this terrain so often. In the same way that I greet a glut of light and low-stakes theatre for children with wariness (believing every audience is entitled to a palette of emotions to experience theatrically, not just one), so too does concern arise about the associating of adolescence with gritty, often tragic, dramas, over and over again. But it does occur—and I cannot deny some personal responsibility, in a few of my own plays for this group. So I am left to wonder: why?

A factor may be that, when considering teenagers, there are often two polarising notions that come into play. The first is that which is commonly expressed to a teenager, and it is fuelled by optimism and aspiration. It prompts questions like: 'What do you want to be?' and affiliated subjects, like jobs and travel and things just on the horizon—there is a future and a possibility, which is so rich a feature of youth.

But then there is the antithetical thought, one that is less often

expressed to the teenager (other than by a parent, perhaps, but not being one this is speculative), and it is motivated by pessimism and concern. It does not concern the future but rather the present, and asks: will they be okay now? Will they navigate these volatile years with enough self-awareness and bravery and nous and good luck (the final so awful a thing to have to wish for in our powerlessness over it) to get through okay?

In this one teenage being, we are imagining all of our hopeful wishes for what will come next, and also all our fears about what will come now.

As such, the notion of a teenage character in a work of art is particularly loaded, and the landscapes a play will ask them to travel often perilous terrain. If works of theatre are allegories for life (as I would argue that all are, whether based on true stories or not), then so often we can load an adolescent work with elements (naturalistic or magical) that will allude to the fears we hold for this population and—as posited by my wife Essie in the following conversation—the fears they hold for themselves.

I was 16 when the film of *Blackrock* came out, and Essie was 15, so while walking along the streets of Hobart one day, we talk about it. We both have vivid memories of the screen version (the play not encountered during teenagehood) and remember that, as adolescent viewers, it was a powerful and affecting work for us. And though our own teenage encounters may have held less brutality, still we felt resonances to our own situations, not because of actual occurrences but rather, because of potentiality.

Essie says of those years: ‘We are all waiting for something to happen’. And I agree, as an encapsulation of one’s mindset then. Maybe because of the aforementioned dual concerns ascribed to teenagehood—a sense of great possibility, coupled with a sense of great concern—one can feel during that time a heightened existential

state, which teeters between the liberties of a life evolving, and the captivity of a life threatened.

Both psycho- and physiologically, conflicting emotions and states are butting up against each other, so that it can be hard to discern where one ends and the other begins—and in this context, the earlier discussion of ‘thrill’ and ‘thrill’ becomes pertinent and tenable. The dramatic has the ability to occur, because the sense of *dramatis* within us is so strong. Which then leaves the harrowing consideration within a teenager’s head: were this event to become a reality, would I (in so early a stage of life and in the midst of crafting my own identity) discover myself brave enough to be a moral bastion, or weak enough to be complicit?

In the context of an audience at the theatre, or a viewer in a cinema, we can view such theoreticals with a safe remove. An allegorical landscape that could be our own is laid before us. Protagonists who might be our peers or ourselves hold court. The emotional terrain is a relative thing. And teenagers do not need this exercise all the time, but occasionally such objective reflection holds great import.

A play like *Blackrock* provides this. The hellish true event that spawned the story (the rape and murder of fourteen-year-old Leigh Leigh in 1989) could not become the psychological exercise that is the story without the conduit of an artwork sitting between. In this way, it is borne from historical fact, but holds its worth as a work of comparative fiction. It is met as theatrical fiction, but comes to hold power for the audience as a work of comparative fact.

It is a play that I now find myself questioning the archetypal nature of, as an adult. But it is a play that I also loved for its archetypes, as a teenager. And so I see this to be my issue, having gone from one state to another.

And the present or future audiences of *Blackrock* have not. They are teenagers still.

It is them that this work serves.

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'The First 200 list of works on the Reading Australia website was chosen by the Australian Society of Authors' Council after considerable debate and discussion.'

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