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Contemporary adults can confirm that in times past students who experienced bullying at school were told to ‘toughen up’, ‘stand up for yourself’ or ‘just ignore it’. Only in recent times has bullying become a social issue of concern to schools, since research findings have identified the negative effects of bullying on students’ academic progress, social development and health. So why develop a play on bullying for presentation to secondary students in Australian high schools?



# **Background to Burnt**



## Characteristics of the Play

In a single play it is not possible to include all the features one would wish to include. The unique features of this play were judiciously selected from the range of options after the team prioritised what they perceived as the most relevant issues facing the target audience, secondary school students. These issues included the gender differences in bullying behaviour, developing empathy for the victim in the play and ultimately for other victims of bullying, mobilising the bystanders to assist the victim, exposing myths about bullying including the type of people who bully, and depicting the devastating effects of continued bullying on the victim.

### Plot and Style

*Burnt* has a straightforward plot as described by a year 8 student:

*The plot for Burnt is the story of a boy, Simon, getting bullied by another boy, Richard. There are three kids, Em, Hann and Jack, who say they are Simon's friends, but they are only trying to stop Simon, who has a thing with fire and his best friend, an ant called Fred, from burning down the school. Simon succeeds and burns down part of the school. In the end Richard feels guilty for pushing Simon earlier. All through the play there is black humour. The play is really believable, interesting and funny. I really enjoyed your play.*

However, the playwright created a powerful non-linear narrative which builds tension as the audience waits to discover the nature of the victim's response to relentless bullying. The play is cleverly structured to interweave the bystanders' reflections and misgivings about the bullying among scenes depicting the events leading up to the final fiery outcome. Monologues and flashbacks are used in *Burnt* to allow the spectator to see inside the psyche of the victim. These devices let the audience 'listen in' to the inner workings of the victim. The four strategically-placed monologues spoken by the victim provide a sustained, emotional, empathetic experience for a young audience.

### Gender

Male and female types of bullying are quite different and the phenomenon of female bullying is less well understood than male bullying. Therefore, one feature of the play attempted to counter the notion that bullying is only a male problem. The idea was to extend the idea of 'male-only' bullying in students' minds. However, the playwright had difficulty with the complexity of this task for two reasons. First, as he explained, he had only experienced bullying from a male perspective – 'because I am a guy, I know about guy bullying'. The second difficulty was associated with writing a play about two protagonists, which, he decided, was messy and aesthetically unworkable. Therefore, a decision was made to omit bullying as perpetrated by girls (as was the concept of 'mobbing' for the same reason). In place of depicting girls as bullies, the playwright was asked to include the traditionally 'female' types of bullying (social ostracism, withdrawal of friendships, articulate verbal forms of bullying) by characterising the chief character, a male bully, as having certain feminised bullying styles. For example, 'Richard' is very

## It Tastes Like Fart

*(Simon sits alone. He stares at the audience.)*

SIMON: I used to light matches and put the burning match in my mouth. It didn't taste very nice. It tasted like ... sulphur or ... something like that, you know, like ... it tasted like hell. Brimstone, sulphur, you know. It tasted like fart. That's what it tasted like ... it tasted like fart. Not that I've tasted fart. I've not tasted fart. But it's what I imagined fart would taste like ... that strong, slightly sweet taste. So I put the match in my mouth and it's alight and ... and I'm momentarily scared that the match will burn the roof of my mouth ... but you see, what I do is, I close my mouth over the match. I cut out the oxygen that's in my mouth. The flame can't burn without the oxygen and the match goes out. Like ... it just goes out. I take the match out and I blow the smoke away. Just a little bit of smoke. Not much. And I feel I've conquered it. I've conquered the match. I've beaten fire. I can control it. But there's an awful taste left in my mouth ... and it stays there for too long. I have to rinse with water, just to get the taste away. That doesn't work. I have to get a mint. A strong mint. Just to get that taste away. The taste doesn't go. It's stuck there in my mouth. Around my teeth. On my tongue. It's just there. I can't forget the taste. As hard as I try, I can't forget the taste.

## Buy the Matches

*(Simon is running down the corridor of the school. Behind him we hear voices.)*

EMILY: Simon ... come back ...

JACK: What are you doing, Simon?

HANN: Simon ... Simon ...

*(Simon reaches a classroom. He opens the door and closes it behind him. Just as he does, Emily, Hann and Jack enter running after him.)*

EMILY: Come out of the classroom, Simon.

*(Jack tries the door.)*



JACK: It's locked.

HANN: Simon ... open the door!

*(Simon starts to barricade the door.)*

SIMON: No way ... I'm not opening the door.

*(Hann, Emily and Jack hear noises.)*

HANN: What's he doing?

JACK: I don't know.

EMILY: What are you doing, Simon?

SIMON: What do you think I'm doing ... hear the noise ... I'm barricading myself in ...

EMILY: Come on, Simon.

SIMON: Leave me alone would you!

JACK: Come on, mate ... you don't need to do this.

SIMON: What the hell would you know? You know nothing!

JACK: But think of your future, mate.

SIMON: My future ... future is just an all-consuming VR environment. The future is just robots and overpopulation. No trees. No flowers.

HANN: Look ... Simon ... look ... this is like a hero thing. This is like a revenge thing. This is like a James Dean, Christian Slater ... *Heathers* ... you know, knock off the pretty Heather girls and blow up the school thing, right. This is like Jason with the hockey mask wreaking revenge on the society that did him over on Friday the thirteenth. Use the axe, use the piano wire type of thing, right? Am I right? Well they don't work, they're just movies. Crap but good movies, but just movies.

SIMON: Hann ... look, Hann ... this is something I have to do ... I don't need your movie bull ...

EMILY: But you could get hurt.

SIMON: It doesn't matter. I want to get hurt. I like pain. Pain is good.

EMILY: It matters to me.

SIMON: It doesn't matter, Em ... it doesn't matter. No-one cares. Empathy is just for guidance counsellors.

EMILY: It really matters to me. I don't want you to get hurt ...