

MARY'S STORY by JOHN TARRANT

CHARACTERS

MARY BENNET
MRS BENNET, Mary's mother
ELIZABETH FRANKLIN
MRS SUMMERS, the headmistress
SUSAN FLETCHER
MISS TINSDALE
SAM BENNET, Mary's younger sister
ISOBEL BENNET, Mary's other younger sister
HELEN, Mary's child
VOICE 1
VOICE 2

The play is designed for four female actors, with the following doubling:

Actor 1: Mary Bennet
Actor 2: Mrs Bennet, Elizabeth Franklin
Actor 3: Mrs Summers, Susan Fletcher, Sam Bennet and Voice 1
Actor 4: Miss Tinsdale, Isobel Bennet, Voice 2 and Helen

The play is based on a fictional injustice which takes place in a girls' school in 1955. The school is small and not particularly prestigious. Mary, a quiet 15 year old, tries to defend a friend during a classroom fight and is then caned, along with the other two girls. Her mother tries to demand an apology for the injustice.

The play deals with the issue of punishment in schools and the impact of injustice. It is a stylised play using a mixture of physical theatre techniques, naturalism and multi-role playing.

Staging is of the simplest. The set is simply four chairs which are used to denote several locations. Props, apart from the cane, are mimed. Costume should be neutral with the use of additions such as school ties, a pair of spectacles, etc.

The length of the play [approx 25 minutes] and the cast size make this a good play for GCSE examination. With the multiple roles, all actors have plenty to do.

THE PLAY'S INTENTIONS

As stated by the author at the beginning, the main intention of the play is to create a forum for a 'discussion' of corporal punishment and of bullying in schools, something which the playwright feels very strongly about, as witness one of his other plays: *Bully For You*. In order to make this a fuller discussion of the subject, and an exposure of the indignity of such practices, the play is set in 1955, when caning was still common practice. The period of the play accounts for the slightly more formal language of the characters, and the bigger generation gap, particularly noticeable between Mary's mother and her children.

Injustice in a school environment is what is focused upon, brought up-to-date in the last little scene where Mary is herself a mother listening to a school injustice from her own daughter. Once again a teacher does not bother to get to the bottom of the story and once again the bully, who a timid member of staff is afraid of, rules the day. Though there is no caning any more, the message is that there are still injustices.

EXTRACT ONE

The girls come to life.

ELIZABETH Mary, Mary, fat and hairy, how does your acne grow?

SUSAN Ignore her, Mary.

ELIZABETH I wasn't speaking to you. What are you - her guardian angel?

SUSAN Leave her alone.

ELIZABETH Why - what are you going to do? Flap your angel wings at me?

SUSAN I'm not scared of you, Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH ***moving close to her*** No?

SUSAN No.

MARY It's all right, Susan, just leave it.

ELIZABETH Shut your big mouth, Mary Mary.

SUSAN ***pushes Elizabeth on the shoulder*** I said leave her alone.

ELIZABETH ***shouts*** Don't touch me, you cow!

They freeze as Elizabeth grabs hold of Susan.

MISS TINSDALE I've never seen anything like it... not in the thirty years I've been teaching. Like animals they were.

The girls unfreeze and fight. A mixture of slow motion, freeze frames and real speed is needed to create a real impression of violence, and to underline Mary's role in the action, which is as peacemaker. She tries to protect her friend Susan and keeps getting between the antagonists. The action must conclude with a freeze frame which has Mary in the middle of the fight, looking as if she is fully involved in it.

MISS TINSDALE And there, right in the middle of the screeching, screaming mass was Mary Bennet. Of all the girls in the class! Quiet little Mary. I would never have believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes. I had been out for no more than a minute. And there they were, tearing at each other like - animals. [***Miss Tinsdale now enters the class. She becomes a part of the scene as the fighters unfreeze and continue scrapping. A couple of seconds for Miss Tinsdale to flap and look panic-stricken and then she shouts:***] What on earth! Stop! STOP!! Now! [***The girls break from the fight.***] What on earth is going on? [***Silence.***] I have been out of this room for no more than one minute and I come back in to find you behaving like ... like ... animals! What in goodness name's sake do you think you are doing? [***Silence.***] Mary Bennet! Of all the girls in the class, you are the last one I would expect to find fighting. What has got into you?

SUSAN Miss Tinsdale, Mary was ...

MISS TINSDALE I was not speaking to you, Susan Fletcher. I asked Mary the question. [***Pause.***] Well, Mary? [***Pause.***] Nothing to say? [***Pause.***] Well, I might have known *you* would be involved, Elizabeth Franklin. You tell me what was going on.

Mary slowly walks to the front of the stage as the other characters move, speaking the following lines, towards the back. Their voices fade down as Mary begins her monologue, which she starts over the last couple of lines of the dialogue. Mary must be heard over them. The cast then move the chairs to the next location, whilst Mary continues to speak.

ELIZABETH Well, Miss, I was getting on with my work and then she [***Pointing to Mary.***] started shouting names at me and then she hit me, Miss.

SUSAN That's not true, Miss, Mary never...

MISS TINSDALE I didn't ask you to speak, Susan Fletcher. Don't you think you're in enough trouble already? And Elizabeth, are you sure that is really what happened?

ELIZABETH Yes, Miss. She's always calling me names and telling me she's going to

hit me. [**Mary starts to speak her monologue here.**]

SUSAN She's lying, Miss. She started it. She's always picking on Mary...

MISS TINSDALE Susan, this is the last time I'm going to warn you.

MARY It was 1955. The place - my small girls' school in the South East of England. There were always undercurrents of tensions and bitchiness amongst the girls but they hardly ever ended in actual fights.

Elizabeth made up some story about Susan and me picking on her. Miss Tinsdale didn't really believe her, I could tell, but perhaps she found it more peaceful in the end to allow her version of events. All three of us were sent to the Headmistress, Mrs Summers, to be caned for fighting. This meant six sharp strikes across the open palm with a thin, flexible cane which made a 'swish' each time it was brought down. It was always called six 'strokes' of the cane. Strokes is a soft word, though - a comforting word. Why is it that people use gentle words for things which are violent and painful? it didn't feel like I was getting stroked when I was hit with the cane...

EXTRACT TWO

The action now switches to Mrs Summers' office. She is a strict, upright lady who sees the world in black and white.

MISS TINSDALE I was out of the room for about one minute, Mrs Summers. Not a second more. It 's not as if they were unsupervised. They had plenty of work to be getting on with and I had made it perfectly clear that I expected them to continue with this, in silence, until I returned. And when I came in, there they were, behaving like animals, Mrs Summers. In thirty years of teaching, I have never seen anything like it.

MRS SUMMERS But the point is, Miss Tinsdale, you were out of the classroom when the fight began. Is that not the case?

MISS TINSDALE I was out of the classroom, yes, but ...

MRS SUMMERS Therefore, to claim they were 'not unsupervised' is somewhat inaccurate. Would you not agree?

MISS TINSDALE Well, in a manner of speaking you might say that.

MRS SUMMERS Miss Tinsdale, I do say that. And might I remind you that you should remain in your classroom with your students at all times. I am sure we understand each other. [**She gives her a look.**] That will be all, thankyou, Miss Tinsdale, and could you please send the girls in to see me, one by one. I will see Mary Bennet first.

Miss Tinsdale exits. Mrs Summers speaks to the audience.

MRS SUMMERS Keep a distance and you'll keep order. It's a simple rule. I am not here to befriend either teacher or pupil. I am here to run a disciplined school.

Mary Bennet enters.

MRS SUMMERS Mary Bennet. I don't believe I have seen you in circumstances such as these before, have I. [**It is not a question.**]

MARY No, Miss.

MRS SUMMERS Mumbling into the ground is not an effective method of communication, girl. Stand straight, put your hands by your side and look at me.

[**Pause.**] How old are you, Mary?

MARY Fifteen, Miss.

MRS SUMMERS Fifteen. You are almost a young lady, Mary. Tell me, how should a young lady conduct herself?

Pause.

MARY I don't know, Miss.

MRS SUMMERS Well, I should say that were self-evident, Mary. A young lady should conduct herself with dignity and decorum. A young lady, Mary, should not descend into the savagery of fighting. Do I make myself clear?

MARY Yes, Miss. But...

MRS SUMMERS Do not interrupt. Is this the first time you have been caned, Mary?

MARY Yes, Miss.

MRS SUMMERS I trust it will be the first and the last, Mary.

MARY Yes, Miss.

MRS SUMMERS Hold out your hand.

MARY quiet, timidly Please, Miss, it wasn't me. I was trying to stop the fight.

MRS SUMMERS *turning her back on Mary and fetching her cane* I said hold out your hand, Mary. That will be six strokes for fighting and two further strokes for lying. **The caning should look as brutal as possible. The other members of the cast could count the strokes, to emphasise them. With a real cane, Mrs Summers could bring it whistling down against, say, a cushion held up by another member of the cast, whilst the fourth member of the cast has her hand out giving the pained reactions to each stroke. Mary stands out front.**

MARY Where the cane struck, thin red wheals came up like lines of blood across my palm. The skin didn't break, but the pain was sharp. Sharp enough to force tears. Even this pain, however, was easier to bear than the smart of injustice. The Headmistress had not bothered to find out what really happened. The words I wanted to say to her stuck in my throat and lay heavy in my chest. Yes, I cried with the pain but I also cried at the thought of what would happen if my mother found out that I had been caned for fighting...

EXTRACT THREE

ISOBEL You're a liar. Your nose is going to grow and grow and grow.

Mrs Bennet, Mary's mother enters. She is calm but strict.

MRS BENNET Samantha, I sobel, up off the floor now and sit at the table ready for tea.

ISOBEL But, Mummy, Samantha's telling...

MRS BENNET Enough, Isobel. You know how I feel about lies. But you also know how I feel about telling tales. Quickly now. It will get cold.

Mary enters as Mrs Bennet settles the youngsters in front of their food.

MRS BENNET Hello, Mary. Have you had a nice day?

MARY Yes.

MRS BENNET Good. Now, let us have a quiet, peaceful meal together.

They eat - except Mary, who sits with her hands on her lap.

MRS BENNET Why aren't you eating, Mary? Pick up your knife and fork and eat, please.

Mary picks up the fork in her left hand.

MRS BENNET And your knife, Mary. Quickly.

Mary slowly lifts her hand up, but keeps it clenched in a fist.

MRS BENNET Is there something the matter, Mary? [*Pause.*] What's wrong with your hand? [*Pause.*] Mary - hold out your hand and let me see.

Mary very slowly unfolds her hand with the palm facing upwards. Sam and Isobel gaze in wonder. Pause.

MRS BENNET Samantha, Isobel - to bed now.

ISOBEL But ...

MRS BENNET No 'buts.' I said get to bed now. Go!

They move, taking up new positions as Voices 1 and 2.

MRS BENNET What are those marks, Mary?

Mrs Bennet and Mary mime and freeze-frame to the following narration.

VOICE 1 Her mother took Mary into the kitchen and they stood in front of the large stone sink.

VOICE 2 Mary couldn't look at her mother. Fear and humiliation kept her eyes down.

VOICE 1 Her mother was calm. With one hand she took Mary's wounded hand. She placed her other hand under Mary's chin and slowly but firmly turned her head so they looked each other straight in the eye.

MRS BENNET Tell me what happened.

VOICE 2 Mary told her the truth. As she spoke, she didn't blink, but hot, round tears traced their way down her cheeks. Her mother studied her closely.

VOICE 1 When she had finished, Mary's mother looked at her without a change in her expression. Then she said ...

MRS BENNET I believe you, Mary. You are not given to lying. You should not have been treated in this way. I will be going into your school tomorrow...

EXTRACT FOUR

MRS BENNET I have come here to ask you to apologise to my daughter, Mrs Summers. You have beaten her for no reason and she deserves an apology. Do you have any children of your own, Mrs Summers?

MRS SUMMERS I fail to see the relevance of that question, Mrs Bennet.

MRS BENNET I suspect, then, that you do not have children. Because if you did, you would have no difficulty in understanding. Justice is important to anyone, but a sense of justice is particularly strong amongst children. You have beaten my child for something she did not do - because you did not listen to her. Because you didn't bother to get to the bottom of the incident.

MRS SUMMERS I don't believe you fully understand the circumstances here, Mrs Bennet. I assure you I do not take an incident such as this lightly. Fighting is, thankfully, a rarity in this school and I will not tolerate it at any price. I must keep discipline and show to all the children that such behaviour will be punished with the utmost severity. Your daughter was fighting. A senior member of my staff was a witness. Are you suggesting that she is mistaken? Now... I suggest you retract the accusations you have made and leave.

MRS BENNET But to hit a child - and so severely... how can that be justified?

MRS SUMMERS *coldly* Caning is normal practice in all schools, Mrs Bennet. It does the child no long-term harm.

MARY My mother didn't tell me about this interview until long after. I didn't get an apology. Nor was caning stopped in the school through any action that my mother took, though I myself was never caned again. When I realised how brave my mother had been, tackling that headmistress, I was filled with admiration. Could I have done what she did?

We are now in the late 70s/80s. Mary is talking to a child of her own, Helen.

HELEN There was a fight in the playground today, Mum.

MARY What did your teacher do?

HELEN She walked away. She's frightened of that Sharon. She's a big girl. It was Sharon who started the fight - it always is.

MARY In my day she'd have been caned.

HELEN I'd like to see a teacher try to cane her! She'd probably snap it in two!

MARY They've banned the use of the cane now, Helen. It was a cruel punishment.

HELEN It's detentions now. And strict talks from the Head. She's scary. I wouldn't like to be sent to her. [*Pause.*] Mum... Do you think this is right? That teacher - the one who walked away from the fight - reported Carly, not Sharon, for fighting. It's Carly who has to see the Head tomorrow and Sharon's crowing.

MARY *grimly* I bet she is. No, Helen, it's not right. It's not just. It seems that after all, some things never change.