

**YEAR OF THE STRANGERS**  
by MARSALI TAYLOR

**CHARACTERS**

**THE KAPLINSKI FAMILY**

DAWID [pronounced Daveed], the father  
ANIELA, his sister  
MACIEJ [pronounced Matchay] aged 10  
CLAUDIA [pronounced Clowdia], aged 14  
NATALIA, aged 16

DOUGLAS TAIT, aged 11  
CARRIE TAIT, his sister, aged 16

**OTHER SCHOOL PUPILS:**

HELENA GEORGESON, aged 11  
JADWIGA [pronounced Yadweega] aged 11  
MICHAEL GEORGESON, aged 11  
KENNY LEASK, his best friend, aged 11  
MEGAN WILLIAMSON, aged 14  
KARA LEASK, aged 14, her best friend and Kenny's big sister

JOHN SHEPHERD, a teacher in his late twenties.

EXTRAS: MARIA - a Polish guest at the Christmas feast  
A Chorus of Carollers, dressed in Nativity clothes - shepherds, kings etc.  
Other children in school scenes.

Running time, approx 50 minutes.

This is a lovely play to do for a Christmas show. It covers a year, starting with a Polish Christmas just before the Kaplinski family leave their home and ending with Christmas in their new home. This second Christmas shows a blending of the two traditions: British and Polish. In between, we see the Kaplinskis' difficulties and triumphs as they settle in to a new country. We see the way the other children accept [mostly] and welcome the newcomers.

It is necessary to have a cast of at least 14 and would benefit from extras, though characters not used in certain scenes could double. If 14 play this, then all the British cast would be Maria and the carollers in the Polish scene at the start. Other children in the classroom would be imagined.

The play was originally written following actual experiences in the Shetland Isles. However, it is perfectly possible to set it anywhere in the British Isles. There are two scenes in which Polish and Shetland traditions are compared. These I have kept as written. You would need to change the traditions for local ones from your own area. This would be a fun extra to do, in any case, involving all the cast's ideas.

The play is suitable for a cast of 10, 11, 12 or 13 year olds. [English Years 6, 7, 8]

**EXTRACT 1**

**SCENE 1 CHRISTMAS EVE**

**The stage is split between the Tait household on one side and the Kaplinskis on the other. In the centre is a Christmas tree. The tree is decorated on the Tait side traditionally - baubles, tinsel and a fairy on top. The Kaplinski children - Maciej and Natalia - are decorating their side in the traditional Polish way:**

handmade hearts, stars, animals; decorated eggshells, shiny apples, walnuts and unlit candles with a glittering star on top.

Behind them, Claudia is kneeling on a chair to look out of the window. The table centre is laid with a white cloth and best china. In the centre is the oplatek on a plate of hay. The oplatek is the sacred wafer, or bread, blessed by a Priest, which is passed around - shared - by all the participants at the Christmas meal. Aniela is just giving the silver candlesticks a last polish. At the back of the stage, an old-fashioned dresser with a Nativity scene on it.

Three chairs form a sofa on the Tait side. A TV and lamp are placed on a stage block. Carrie is watching TV - a travel documentary - playing softly. The table at the back has a laptop on it.

The lights fade on the Kaplinski side.

Douglas, Kenny and Michael come charging in.

DOUGLAS Carrie, can we watch the football in here?

MICHAEL Your Mum said we could.

CARRIE I'm watching this.

BOYS Awww ...

CARRIE *firmly* I got here first.

*The boys accept this and come down front.*

CARRIE Why can't you watch it in the kitchen?

DOUGLAS Mum's listening to Christmas carols from some church somewhere.

KENNY And she's doing something to the turkey.

DOUGLAS So she wants us out from under her feet.

MICHAEL Why does Christmas make adults so cross? It's brilliant.

CARRIE Brilliant for us. We don't have to worry about it.

MICHAEL What's to worry about? Shove the turkey in the oven, leave it there.

KENNY Peel a few sprouts.

CARRIE Peel a sack of potatoes.

KENNY Roast potatoes! We only ever get those at Christmas.

CARRIE Make little sausages and bread sauce and trifle and Christmas cake.

DOUGLAS Yes, please.

CARRIE Calculate when everything has to go on so it's all cooked at the same time.

MICHAEL Spend Christmas day rushing around getting red in the face.

DOUGLAS I can't wait, I really can't.

MICHAEL Christmas Eve always takes so long.

KENNY What are you getting?

DOUGLAS I'm not sure, but I hope it'll be my own DVD player with a flat-screen TV.

MICHAEL I want the new Scotland strip.

KENNY I think I'm getting a quad.

DOUGLAS Oh, wow!

MICHAEL Amazing! Can I have a go?

KENNY I'm not sure, but Dad said I'm not to go in the shed at all.

DOUGLAS That's so cool.

KENNY I'll have to share it with my brother, though.

*Lights cross-fade to the Kaplinski side of the stage.*

**SCENE 1B Christmas Eve in the Kaplinski household.**

MACIEJ There. Finished.

ANIELA It's beautiful.

CLAUDIA It's still snowing.

ANIELA That means a lucky year. A good omen.

*Maciej comes over to look at the table.*

MACIEJ How many courses have you made us this year, Aunt Aniela?

ANIELA Twelve.

CLAUDIA Twelve! We've never had that many before.

MACIEJ Not even when Mum was alive.

NATALIA I thought it had to be an odd number.

ANIELA Twelve for the twelve apostles. Besides, if this is to be our last Christmas

here in Poland, well, I wanted it to be a special one, with all the traditions.

**A brief silence. The children look uncertain. Maciej wanders round the table.**

**MACIEJ** Two, four, six. Are we having a stranger? ...

## EXTRACT 2

**SCENE 4D The Tait house.**

***Douglas is watching TV on sofa. Carrie enters and drops down beside him.***

**CARRIE** I'm knackered. Absolutely knackered.

**DOUGLAS** Why?

**CARRIE** I was looking after the Polish girl, Natalia.

**DOUGLAS** Maciej's great. He plays striker for his school team and he's really good.

**CARRIE** How did you find that out?

**DOUGLAS** I asked him. All the words are the same - pass, goal, team, striker, all that.

**CARRIE** They can't be the same.

**DOUGLAS** Well, he knows them. 'I in team-school, striker,' he said.

**CARRIE** So he's one of the gang already.

**DOUGLAS** Kenny went on a bit about what his Dad says. I shut him up.

**CARRIE** Good.

**DOUGLAS** So why was Natalie so knackered? Isn't she nice?

**CARRIE** I think she's really fine. Clever, too. That makes it harder in a way. For her, I mean.

**DOUGLAS** Why?

**CARRIE** Well, it's like - it's like - you know the kind of reading books the nursery class would be given, with hardly any different words?

**DOUGLAS** Where is Spot? Is he in here? No, not in here.

**CARRIE** Yeah. We spent the day talking like that.

**DOUGLAS** So did I. Now. English. Jotter.

**CARRIE** Half the words I used, she didn't know the same word. Maths, mathematics. Plane, aeroplane.

**DOUGLAS** But he was brilliant at break.

**CARRIE** We couldn't even begin to actually talk to each other.

**DOUGLAS** Girl talk. [***Dodging out of reach, then putting on girly voice.***] Do you have a boyfriend?

**CARRIE** Boys just grunt at each other anyway. I wanted to ask her all about what her life was like in Poland and what her parents did.

**DOUGLAS** We did talk. He said our playground was good. At his school he just had grass, no climbing frame or multicourt.

**CARRIE** He said that?

**DOUGLAS** He did this [***Gestures.***] and said green. Then he pointed to the multicourt and said, 'Good. Poland no.'

**CARRIE** I'll just have to keep trying.

## EXTRACT 3

**SCENE 5A MARCH.**

***On the route to school.***

***Claudia is standing in one corner, looking miserable. Kara and Megan watching from the other side of the stage.***

**KARA** The Polish girl's looking very long-faced today.

**MEGAN** Sssh, she'll hear.

**KARA** I haven't seen her smile all week. Why did we have to get landed with such a sour-face?

**MEGAN *uncertainly*** She's just shy -

**KARA** She's stuck up. Look, I'll prove it. You watch - I'll ask her if she wants to come shopping with us on Saturday.

**MEGAN** I should ask. It's me looking after her.

**KARA** I'll ask. To show I'm friendly too.

***She goes over to Claudia, asks something. Claudia shakes her head. Kara shrugs, returns to Megan.***

**KARA** Stuck-up. You should give up on her. She doesn't want to know us.

**MEGAN** I said I'd look after her, and I will.

**KARA** There's no point.

**MEGAN** I'll see if I can persuade her.

**KARA** Just leave her ...

***Megan has already gone. Kara looks irresolute as they talk, but brightens as Claudia shakes her head again.***

**MEGAN** She still says no.

**KARA** Let's go then.

***She drags Megan off. Claudia looks after them wistfully.***

## EXTRACT from Production Notes and Technical Cues

### **INTRODUCTION: THEMES, THE PLAY'S INTENTIONS**

At a time when more and more people from other countries are joining our schools, this play is a help to showing the kind of difficulties there are in assimilating them in our day to day lives, and also how hard it is for them to uproot themselves from all they know and come to a place where customs and language are so different.

This play, written by a teacher who lives and works in the Shetland Isles, happened just like this. I queried this, because it seemed to me that there was a lovely generosity - on the whole - from both sides, but this was apparently the case.

Hopefully, just the undertaking of this play by quite young children will help them see the difficulties there are on both sides and encourage a similar generosity of spirit.

It is a nicely constructed play, covering a whole year from a first Christmas where the Kaplinskis are still in Poland, through a sometimes painful and difficult transition, to a second Christmas in the Kaplinskis new chosen country.

One or two scenes I have left entirely set in the Shetlands. You could do the play just as it is, quite easily, allowing your audience to see the lessons it hold without transferring it to your own area. Or you can alter everything to make it pertinent to your school and part of the U.K. The latter will need some research from the children as to 'customs' and historical facts about their area which may be both fun and informative for a class/ cast to undertake.

### **CHARACTERS**

**DAWID KAPLINSKI** - the father, a dentist, who has left Poland for the better working conditions and pay in this country. A kind, thoughtful man.

**ANIELA**, his sister and therefore the childrens' aunt. She has given up her job as a teacher to look after the children, from when their mother died. A very unselfish woman, she nonetheless aches to be able to use her training, but finds it hard to be recognised in this country. We see her moving from school cleaner to a classroom assistant helping Polish immigrant children, at least a step in the right direction.

**MACIEJ** aged 10. A very normal typical boy, good at football, which wins straight to the hearts of the other boys of his age. He adapts the most easily.

**CLAUDIA** aged 14. She is very homesick which is not helped by the fact that she encounters some jealousy and nastiness from Kara - not because of her nationality, but because Kara wants to be Megan's best friend, whereas Megan has been allocated Claudia as a 'friend' in school - a policy which helps assimilation. Yet Claudia has generosity of spirit. She remembers what it felt like to be an outsider and, at the end, works to bring Kara into a friendship with both her and Megan.

**NATALIA** aged 16. Though she is a bright rather bookish girl, Natalia struggles with frustration at not being able to express herself as easily as she used to do. But she is a calm, sensible girl and tackles all problems head on. Very quickly she is fluent and using that good mind of hers to tackle assimilation problems throughout the school. She wants to be a teacher, and it is clear that she will be good at it.

**DOUGLAS TAIT** is chosen to be Maciej's 'friend', to help Maciej through the first weeks of school. This is a good choice; he appears to be a sensible youngster, not as obsessive [about football] as Michael or as prejudiced and easily led as Kenny.

**CARRIE TAIT** - his sister, aged 16. Assigned to Natalia, she quickly becomes friends with her. They are very similar types of girl, sensible and practical, as well as being hard workers who share an enjoyment of reading.

HELENA GEORGESON, aged 11 - a typical girl of this age - mocking of the boys, girlie, but with a good fun sense of humour. Quite sassy and lively.

JADWIGA, aged 11. Another Polish girl who has already been in the class for some time. She gives good advice as to how they should treat the newcomer in their class - Maciej - remembering what made her feel at home. Friend of Helena.

MICHAEL GEORGESON aged 11 - perhaps Helena's twin? But could be a cousin perhaps. He is obsessed with football - lives and breathes it. Maciej, because he is good at the sport, quickly gets his seal of approval.

KENNY LEASK, Michael's best friend. More prejudiced than any of the others - though not from his own thoughts. Kenny quotes his father every other word. It is his father who is against the immigrants. But with the good school policy of finding out more about the people who are aiming to settle in the country, Kenny learns to be more open and even to like Maciej.

MEGAN WILLIAMSON, aged 14. Assigned to be Claudia's 'friend', Megan is torn between this and her previous friendship with Kara. Megan takes the fact she has been asked to look after lonely Claudia seriously and is aware of the honour. Eventually, she chooses Claudia over the jealous Kara.

KARA LEASK, aged 14, is a very needy girl. She is bitchy to Claudia, though not usually overtly - she simply tries to force Megan into making a choice between them all the time, instead of following Megan's suggestion of simply doing things as a threesome, to include Claudia.

JOHN SHEPHERD - the teacher of Maciej's class. He is obviously a popular and caring teacher.

## **SETTING**

This needs to be kept as simple as possible. The main settings are the houses of the Kaplinskis and the Taits, and the schoolroom of the younger children. Other places are neutral areas, which can be slotted around these three main places.

Depending on the size of your stage/ performance area, you can either have these three places as permanent settings, or you will have to move as quickly as possible from classroom to the homes and back again.

The writer suggests the two homes are done on a split stage...