

**GCSE (9–1)**  
*Teacher Guide*

# DRAMA

J316  
For first teaching in 2016

## Missing Dan Nolan – Mark Wheeler

Version 1



# Introduction

## **Foreword by Karen Latto, OCR Subject Specialist: Drama**

*As a starting point, when deciding the set texts for our new GCSE (9-1) in Drama, I reviewed a number of posts on social media about the texts teachers recommended for teaching at Key Stage 4. I knew early on that I wanted a Mark Wheeller play on the list, having taught *Too Much Punch For Judy*, which was very well received by my students.*

*I found that Mark was part of a Facebook drama group and made contact. Once it was decided that *Missing Dan Nolan* was our text of choice, Mark kindly agreed to create resources for us for the text. This delivery guide was created by Mark Wheeller and talks from his perspective as playwright and as a teacher.*

Karen

# Missing Dan Nolan

## Origins

Missing Dan Nolan is based on the true story of Dan Nolan, a fourteen-year-old boy who went fishing in Hamble (between Southampton and Portsmouth) on the night of 1st January 2002. Unbeknown to his parents he and his three friends had taken a litre bottle of vodka.

*“We didn’t detect anything out of the ordinary. We just had our dinner, cleared up, then watched Shakespeare in Love.. I just fell asleep watching the telly.”*

Pauline Nolan (Dan’s Mother)

Late that evening the boys became separated and, although the other three arrived home safely, Dan never returned.

21 months later human remains were discovered on a remote pool area in Swanage, 33 miles in a straight line 60 miles by road. These remains were positively identified as Dan’s.

I live in Southampton and had seen the Missing Dan Nolan posters in my locality. My eldest, Ollie, was nearly the same age as Dan, so I could empathise with the parents totally.

When I heard the family were trying to find ways of raising awareness I offered to write a play.

*“We assumed that Dan’s face would be absolutely everywhere, appeals on national TV and everyone would be aware, that all the wheels would just click into place... but it’s not like that. It was almost like we were swept under the carpet. We didn’t know how to handle that and didn’t know how to stop it.”*

Pauline Nolan

I created ***Too Much Punch For Judy***, in 1987. This is a verbatim play which means all the words in the script are from interviews I conducted with the people involved in the actual event depicted in the play.

I purposely moved away from using this style of playwriting as I felt I was cheating by using other people's words. If I was to be a "proper playwright" (whatever that is) I must make up my own words. In **Hard To Swallow** (1989), I used mainly the words of those involved in the actual event but some scenes included dialogue I made up from the information I had been given about the scene. In **Legal Weapon** (1996), I took a further step away from verbatim having one character's (Andy) real words included in a fiction of my invention. All my other plays and musicals from 1988-2002 were invented entirely.

When I decided to write Missing Dan Nolan I had no hesitation in returning to verbatim to tell this story. My insecurities about being a "proper playwright" vanished. This play had to get as close to the truth as memory would allow. These people had lived through this tragedy and were, in my opinion the only people who could tell the story.

I interviewed Dan's parents and sister, Clare. (One regret I have is that I didn't do the whole play from Clare's point of view. She spoke beautifully but was only 12 or 13.) The interview with her was her mum's idea and very much an afterthought. I interviewed the three boys who were with him that evening (two weren't particularly talkative) and one of their parents. I also interviewed the policeman who was in charge of the investigation. The play is made from their words exclusively.

Four members of my Youth Theatre group worked long hours during the summer holidays to put the play on, only ten months after Dan had gone missing. It was still an ongoing investigation. One newspaper review offers an impression of what the atmosphere was like that night in our Theatre:

*"I can't remember the last time I saw a grown man, a stranger, cry in front of me. As the tale of a family in freefall unfolded, slowly and silently loved ones sought out each others' hands and clasped them tightly in the darkness to a chorus of staccato sniffs and muffled sobs. A row of young lads were trying desperately to hide their embarrassed tears in front of their mates - who wouldn't have noticed anyway because they too were sobbing. The performance is based on real conversations with the family and, instead of a script there has been an editing process where their statements have been fused into a coherent and powerful dialogue."*

Ben Clerkin - Southern Evening Echo

Missing Dan Nolan has gone on to be studied in many schools and performed professionally and by schools more than 150 times in its short life. It has won awards at every Festival it has ever been entered for. It remains one of my favourite plays I have written.

I am thrilled that Missing Dan Nolan has been selected as a set text and from this Facebook message from Clare, so are Dan's family.

**Hi Mark,**

**I hope you're well.**

**Thanks for getting in touch and letting us know. I told my Mum, she was thrilled, such great news.**

**I am so pleased the text has, is and continues to, spread such an important message amongst (I can say it now as I'm late twenties), youngsters, and so lovely it's done in Dan's memory.**

**Thank you for all the time and effort you put in to make it the success it is.**

**With best wishes,**

**Clare**



## Thinking Conceptually

Students will need to understand the characteristics of this text through practical exploration. They will select examples from their own study to answer questions about it in the exam and demonstrate their knowledge and understanding.

They will need to define how the historical and cultural contexts have an effect on their exploration of the performance work.

Missing Dan Nolan was set in 2002. I remember all my contact, regarding the interviews for the play, were organised by landline. Mobile calls were often “pay as you go”, expensive and rarely on contract. Dan, for example had no credit for his phone that evening.

I was aware of only a few children who had gone missing in the years leading up to Dan’s disappearance. Notably James Bulger, nine years earlier, and the same age as my Ollie when he went missing. Pauline, Dan’s mum, asked me to guess how many people went missing in the UK at that time per year. I replied about ten, imagining if anything I was over-estimating. I was shocked to hear that the Missing Persons helpline received 100,000 calls per year. 30,000 cases remained unresolved, like Dan’s.

Dan’s parents were struggling to get any coverage for Dan’s disappearance. With no Facebook they were entirely reliant on the television news programmes which had decided to focus on the case of Millie Dowler, possibly because she was a girl, and therefore, they perhaps concluded, more likely to appeal to the viewing public.

## Characters

### Main characters

The main characters in the play are:

#### The Nolan Family:

**Pauline** (Mum) who carries most of the story.

**Greg** (Dad) who wasn’t confident about the idea of being interviewed. A few of his lines originate from Pauline but made good sense (to me) to be said by both parents as a duologue, rather than Pauline monologues.

**Clare** (Sister) who was younger than Dan, around 13.

**Dan.** Obviously the big problem with Dan is that although he seems the central character in the play he is the only person in the play who I was unable to interview. His lines are gleaned from the others. One has to assess what their

agenda may be in telling me what he said. He was not there to disagree. For example, I have differing accounts from police witnesses and the boys who were with him about how drunk he was.

#### The boys who stayed with Dan on that evening:

**Joe**, who was clearly very drunk.

**Thom**, who had the dilemma of who to accompany home on that very cold -3 degrees night.

**Sarah**, who wasn’t on my original list to interview. She contacted me when she heard I was writing the play saying she wanted to talk to me. I heard later from a student I taught, who attended the same dance school, that Sarah had planned to ask Dan out following the Christmas holidays and was never able to do so. Even if this is not true, (I have no idea) it adds a wonderful context to the one main speech Sarah delivers. She speaks on behalf of all of Dan’s school friends.

**DS Stewart:** His views offer the play a more detached perspective on this investigation. He delivers the information as facts. His use of language has a different tone from others in the play.

#### The subsidiary characters

**George:** George was there for the early part of the evening but had to leave early when his dad (a former Southampton FC football player) took him home.

**Andy:** Andy was interviewed by me and part of the scene at his door came from his memory. His monologue was written by him and sent on to me. He wanted to carefully consider his response at that point in the play.

**Liam:** I didn’t talk to Liam. He appears fleetingly in the play from an account from his parents.

**Max and Lorna:** Both these characters were referred to in a story Sarah told me. They appear briefly and adopt the words Sarah attributed to them.

**Police Liaison Officer:** I was unable to speak to this person. The lines he/she takes are taken from Pauline’s account of their meeting. I think this is clear in the way the conversation is set up. Pauline introduces it by saying: *“The conversation went something like this, as I remember it.”*

**Ensemble:** There are some unnamed ensemble roles who narrate in the deleted scene. We presented this scene separately at Dan’s anniversary service in 2003. We didn’t include the scene in the OYT performance of the play as we were restricted to a time limit in the Festival we entered.

An interesting question is: If you were to include this scene in the main body of the play? Where could you put it?

Some performances of *Missing Dan Nolan* incorporate an ensemble of actors. The number of people involved in this is unlimited but if I were using a chorus I would probably choose to have no more than 25, and probably, considerably less.

## Exploring the text

The following sources may also be useful starting points for exploring this text and style of performance:

- Verbatim/Documentary Theatre: Alecky Blythe, Peter Cheeseman (Victoria Theatre Stoke on Trent), The Living Archive Project (Milton Keynes)
- Physical Theatre: Kneehigh, Complicite, OYT (Oaklands and Oasis Youth Theatre)
- Other Documentary/Verbatim plays by Mark Wheeller: *Too Much Punch For Judy* (1987), *Hard To Swallow* (1990), *Chequered Flags to Chequered Futures* (2014) & *I Love You Mum - I Promise I Won't Die* (2016).

Students will need to be able to identify the key themes in the play:

- Missing people in the UK – Missing Persons Bureau <http://missingpersons.police.uk>

*The aim of the Missing People's Bureau website is to publicise information about unidentified people and remains, enlisting the public to help maximise the chances of identification. They hope to empower families of missing people to play an active part in searching for their loved ones and bring vital closure if they are identified. The website features general information around missing person investigations and is intended to be a valuable resource. The public can review unidentified cases and send details regarding the potential identity via their online reporting form.*

- Children who went missing in years before Dan:

*James Bulger.*

*Holly and Jessica Wells.*

*Millie Dowler, who went missing at around the same time as Dan. Her case was heavily featured on UK TV.*

- Parental and friends' responsibilities.

"Fancy them letting him out at that time of night."

*Dan and his friends' parents were openly criticised by some for "allowing" their fourteen year olds out on their own at that time of night. When I questioned them about it they said that it was normal for people of this age to be out at that time of night in a fishing community. They might have been more concerned had Dan been out alone. I felt that they thought the friends had an unspoken "duty of care" for each other. Before they left that evening Pauline remembered saying:*

"There are weirdos about. Keep your noses clean and stick together."

*Interestingly neither Tom nor Joe remember Pauline saying this. They acknowledge that they knew that is what they should have done regardless of what was or wasn't said.*

*It's an interesting question. Do friends have a duty of care over those they are with and if so, (how) should they be (held) accountable if something awful happens?*

## Thinking Contextually

One of the things I always notice about my verbatim plays is that they have many monologues and much is direct address. When you read the play it looks as though it may be very wordy, and is in danger of becoming a lecture to the audience.

I would want students to explore how they can physicalise the script and make it visually, as well as aurally, arresting.

### Physicalisation and the use of music

An excellent place to start is the very opening section, which I have seen people skip over when reading it as it is "just stage instructions". This section, although it is all in italics, is a key part of the play as it establishes the physical approach to the performance. It needs to be fast paced to engage the audience from the very first moment. It also uses a soundtrack. It suggests the music we used in the original production but this could be changed. Something I have been keen to explore in my work since writing this play is the use of musical underscore to highlight or reflect emotions in the scene. I am keen for music to become a more integral part of the play, as it is in this opening section. Students could consider what other music could be used?

### Monologues

The monologues (Pauline and Sarah in particular) need movement (together with use of voice) to help tell the story. These speeches (unless a very positive decision

to do so is made) must not become stand still (or even sit down), point to the audience, lectures. Equally the movement must not be such that it distracts from the power of the verbatim words which is also a danger. The whole thing is a tightrope act and needs thorough exploration and experimentation with various ways of presenting it before decisions are made as to how to go forward. It is all too easy to accept the first response and say “we’ve done it.”

One really interesting addition is the use of chorus. How can an ensemble of actors alongside the character delivering the monologue help tell the story? Alternatively how would the performance look if Pauline (for example) were to become a chorus of Paulines? I have, in the past said that monologues can be brought to life if you imagine your body is in the time of the speech as a flashback and your voice is more like an out of body voice over in the present day.

### **Duologues and dialogue**

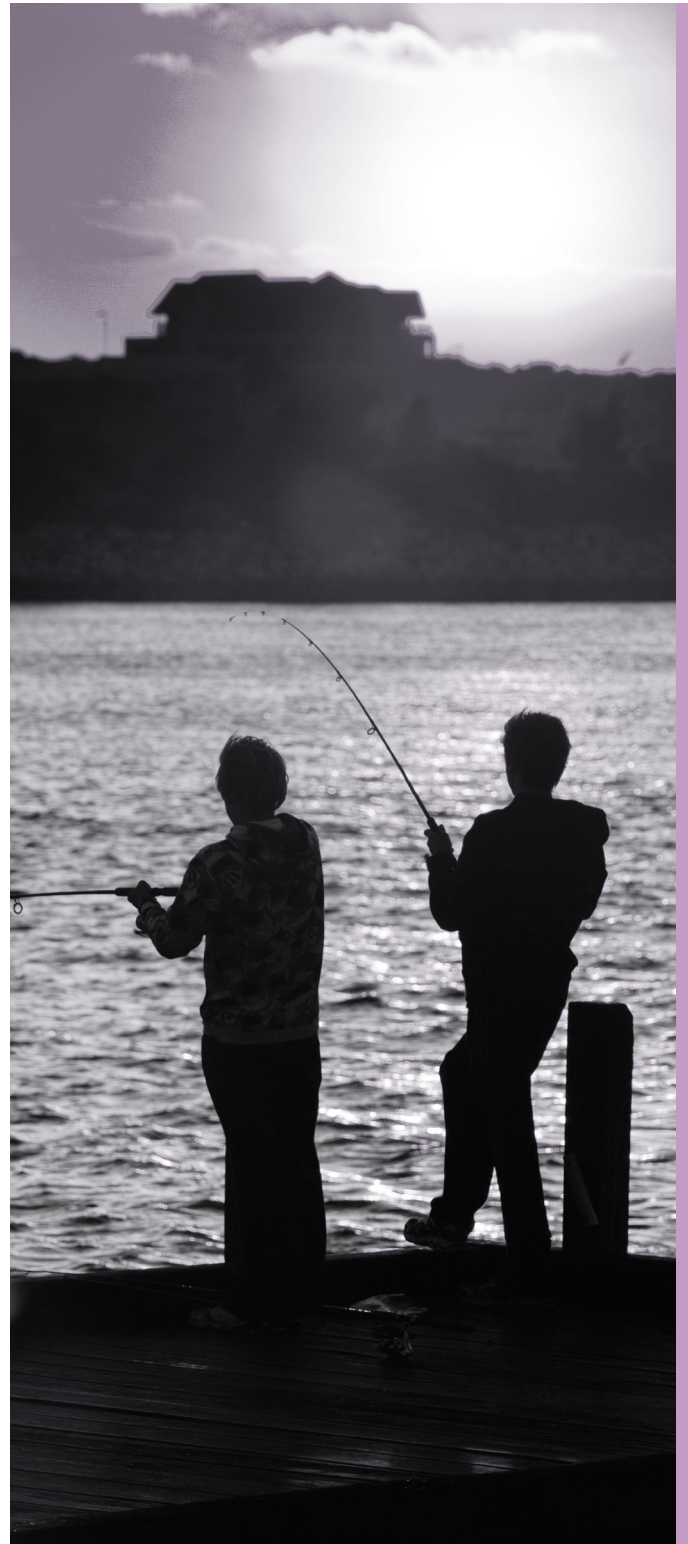
Often, when more than one person speaks in a scene, they are not conversing. They are often narrating to the audience as in the monologues. Once again, these need to be staged with visual interest. Using a chorus is one way to physicalise these sections. (See above.) There are occasions where the cast flash back into a conversation they remember having at the time. These are designed to be supremely naturalistic and somehow your voice and actions need to indicate instantly that you have flashed back.

### **Transitions**

Locations change fast in this play. Transitions between locations also need to be fast and fluid. Set/props need to be minimal so that there is no time “wasted” waiting for things to be moved on stage.

### **Design**

The visuals of the stage design (albeit minimal and multi-locational) need to interest the audience and provide something more than a blank space. (I have learnt this over the years by doing a number of blank space productions.) So, how can set design and lighting help to provide visual interest?





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