

# ***The Danish Play***

by Sonja Mills

a Nightwood Theatre (Toronto) production

## **Study Guide**

**THE NATIONAL ARTS CENTRE ENGLISH THEATRE  
PROGRAMMES FOR STUDENT AUDIENCES  
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## About This Study Guide

Portions of this study guide are formatted in easy-to-copy single pages. They may be used separately or in any combination that works for your classes. Here is an outline of the contents of each section with suggestions as to its use:

<b>Page(s)</b>	<b>Section Title</b>	<b>May Be Used To</b>
1 - 2	<b>An Overview</b>	Introduce students to story, setting, characters, and themes
3	<b>Background: The Life of Agnete Ottosen</b>	Provide historical information on the life of the main character
4	<b>Historical Context 1: The Danish Resistance</b>	Teach about a historical event central to the story
5	<b>Historical Context 2: Horrors of Life in the Camps</b>	Teach about historical events central to the story
6	<b>A Production Who's Who</b>	Program detail and background on Nightwood Theatre
7	<b>Suggested Activities</b>	Suggest ways to extend students' learning in the classroom
8	<b>What to Watch for in this Production</b>	Guide students' viewing of the production
9 - 10	<b>An Interview with Playwright Sonja Mills</b>	Offer insight into the creative process
11	<b>Focus on Script Development</b>	Teach about aspects of the playwriting process
12	<b>Resources</b>	Lists selected print and web resources
13	<b>Photo of Agnete Ottosen</b>	May be displayed in the classroom
14 - 15	<b>Two of John Lauener's Colour Photos of <i>The Danish Play</i></b>	May be displayed in the classroom

## **An Overview** (page 1 of 2)

### **Story**

Spanning more than 30 years in the life of its main character, *The Danish Play* tells the story of Agnete Ottosen -- poet, Danish Resistance worker, and survivor of Nazi prison camps. This courageous and uncompromising woman was determined to make her way in the world on her own terms no matter what the cost. Agnete Ottosen was the great aunt of playwright Sonja Mills. Mills was inspired to write the play after reading the diaries and poems Mills' mother had inherited from her sister.

### **Setting**

The action in the play occurs between 1940, the year of the Nazi invasion of Denmark, and 1962, the year of Agnete's death. The scenes shift fluidly between one time period and location and the next in a non-linear fashion. Many scenes occur in North Aalborg, Denmark, in the homes and workplaces of the central characters, between 1940 and 1962. Other scenes are set in the following locations: a bathtub; a Gestapo interrogation room; during work detail and in the barracks of Nazi prison camps; in a playhouse; in a hospital room; at a bus stop; in a judge's chambers; at a "telephone office"; and in a train station.

### **Characters**

Agnete [pronounced: ow-NAY-da] Ottosen is the central character in *The Danish Play*. The action follows real and imagined events in her life. Agnete's age in *The Danish Play* ranges from 28 to 51. The other major characters are the fictional creations of the playwright, although the character of Mads Pedersen is modeled on the lawyer who was Agnete's real life employer. Agnete's circle of friends includes Mads (aged 33 to 57); Michael [pronounced: MEE-kale] Hansen (22-44); Michael's sister, Helga (32-54); and Helga's employee, Bente (19-41).

The minor characters in *The Danish Play* are a Gestapo officer; Morten; Guards #1 and #2; a German soldier; a German man; a judge; a tourist; a telephone clerk; a pregnant woman; Sophie; Lisbet; a hospital worker; a nurse; and a home social worker.

## An Overview (page 2 of 2)

### Themes

#### Resistance versus Conformity

*“It is the normal people who keep our society functioning, but it is the abnormal people who look after its progression.”* Agnete Ottosen

The theme of resistance versus conformity plays out at both the historical and the personal level in *The Danish Play*. Thousands of Danes refused to willingly comply with the oppressive and ethically repugnant dictates of the Nazi invaders, choosing instead, like Agnete, to work for the Resistance. But even before the Danish occupation, the play gives us the suggestion that Agnete was born to resist and oppose the tyranny of social expectations; she opts to divorce rather than stay in a troubled marriage and puts herself in the line of fire for her fellow workers by helping them organize a strike. The fierce defiance that fueled her opposition to Nazi oppression is no match for the bureaucratic power of the state in post-war Denmark where her unconventional choice to pursue parenthood as a woman alone sets her up for social isolation and heartbreak.

#### The Costs of War

*“War rips people apart—and not just on the battlefield. It affects people in horrible ways, much more so than we ever read in the headlines.”* Sonja Mills

Agnete’s story throws into sharp relief the tragic consequences of war and the enormity of the personal losses that have to be reckoned with long after the fighting has stopped.

#### Boundaries, Borders and “Us versus Them” Thinking

*“The Danish Play makes us grapple with the lines in the sand, the borders that separate us as human beings.”* Kelly Thornton

This Nightwood Theatre production critiques the process of defining personal identity and human worth on narrow, exclusionary, and ultimately divisive grounds such as nationality (German vs. Dane); ethnicity (Aryan vs. Jew); gender (male vs. female); and sexual orientation (gay vs. straight).

## Background: The Life of Agnete Ottosen

Agnete Ottosen was born into a working-class Danish family a few years before the beginning of WW1. In her early twenties she married and then divorced. Her drive to right the injustices she perceived around her led her to organize a strike at the Opel tobacco factory where she worked. Agnete joined the Danish Resistance in 1940 to fight against the Nazis. During her time as a Resistance worker she printed and wrote for underground newspapers, took part in organizing the mass exodus of Jews to Sweden, and participated in espionage.

Agnete was captured by the Gestapo in 1943 and sent to Frøslev, the Nazi prison camp in Padborg, Denmark, where she refused to reveal any information about her resistance activities. She was subsequently sent to Ravensbrück, the notorious women's concentration camp in Germany, where she witnessed unspeakable atrocities and was used as a human guinea pig for medical experiments in sterilization. Though her legs had been repeatedly broken in the same place and her hands were badly damaged, Agnete survived her ordeal. Many of the poems in the book she was later to publish bear witness to the suffering she endured during this period.

Readjusting to life in post-war Denmark was difficult for Agnete. Fiercely independent, she defied the conventions of her society and intentionally conceived a child out of wedlock, after undergoing corrective surgery to repair the damage that had been inflicted on her at Ravensbrück. The child, a boy named Søren, was soon removed from her care when she refused to divulge the name of the child's father to state authorities. She spent some time undergoing psychiatric treatment while continuing to fight for custody of her son and for women's rights and other social causes in the 1950s.

At 15, Søren was returned to his mother's care but Agnete's victory was to be short lived: the boy died in a traffic accident on the day of their reunion. In 1962 Agnete Ottosen, freedom fighter and survivor of the Nazi horrors, took her own life at 51.

### map of the world

*I'm practically a map of the world now—  
with moors, rivers, mountains and cities.  
The mountains are the bruises, some more yellow than blue.  
In between are the flatlands, mostly grey from the beatings.*

*Every river and lake dug into my skin--those are the marks  
around my waist and wrists--water runs in a ring.  
The cities are the holes left after the needle they stick me with,  
each dot a new office tower or shopping complex.  
And the volcanoes that are my ears  
pound as if it were all one big puke.*

*I'm practically a map of the world now—  
and I lie here and wonder if they're coming again today  
to deepen the river,  
or hoist the mountain,  
or build another city.*

Agnete Ottosen

## Historical Context 1: The Danish Resistance

Though Denmark signed a non-aggression pact with Germany in 1939, Hitler invaded the tiny kingdom on April 9, 1940. The Danish nation of 4 million, led by King Christian X and its elected government, gave scant resistance to the invasion. German rule was exercised in a moderate way through its military hierarchy, not mainly through the SS. Denmark served as Hitler's "model protectorate".

The Danes pledged not to resist German rule and the monarchy, democratically elected Parliament, and legal system were permitted to govern according to Danish laws, systems and values. The Danes committed themselves to protecting Jewish citizens and the 8,000 Jews in Denmark were neither isolated nor persecuted; the \*Nuremberg laws were not applied. King Christian led his people in tolerance.

The benign occupation lasted from April of 1940 to the summer of 1943, when the European military balance had begun to shift. At Stalingrad, the Nazi regime suffered its first irreversible defeat; the destruction of European Jewry, however, was unceasing. By the summer of 1943, Hitler could no longer tolerate Denmark's behaviour or political values. The Danish underground was committing frequent acts of sabotage and espionage, and approximately 220 underground newspapers were being published and distributed right under the nose of the German occupation.

On August 29, 1943, the Danish Cabinet resigned in response to unacceptable demands and Denmark awoke to find martial law had been declared. The Wehrmacht (German armed forces) and SS took over, and secret plans to arrest Danish Jews were set for October 1st and 2nd, on Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year), when they would be in their homes celebrating. However, Duckwitz, a shipping attaché at the German Embassy in Copenhagen, leaked the news to Danish officials and, miraculously, within a few days all of Danish Jewry were in hiding.

During the following weeks 7,500 Jews escaped to neutral Sweden, making the crossing in Danish fishing boats during the night. Of the Jews that were arrested and deported to \*\*Theresienstadt, Denmark monitored their survival closely, sending Red Cross packages and delegates to examine conditions in the camp. Fifty-one Jews died there of "natural causes" but Denmark was unique among occupied countries in one respect: so far as is known not a single Danish Jew was put to death in a Nazi gas chamber.

By liberation in May 1945 there were 50,000+ Danish resistance fighters, 10,000 of whom had been arrested and deported to German prisoner of war camps. In the end 3,213 Danes were killed resisting the Germans and now a permanent resistance museum stands in their memory in the city of Copenhagen.

From "*Resistance and Rescue: Denmark's Response to the Holocaust*", Judith S. Goldstein, Ph.D.

\*Nuremberg laws: Racist laws passed in Hitler's Germany that denied Jewish citizens of their rights.

\*\* Theresienstadt: A concentration camp in Czechoslovakia run by the SS. Jews were transferred from there to extermination camps further east. The Nazis attempted to cover up their extermination of European Jews from the rest of the world; when Red Cross officials visited the camp, phony stores, cafés, schools, and gardens were set up to make it appear to be a "model Jewish settlement".

## Historical Context 2: Horrors of Life in the Camps

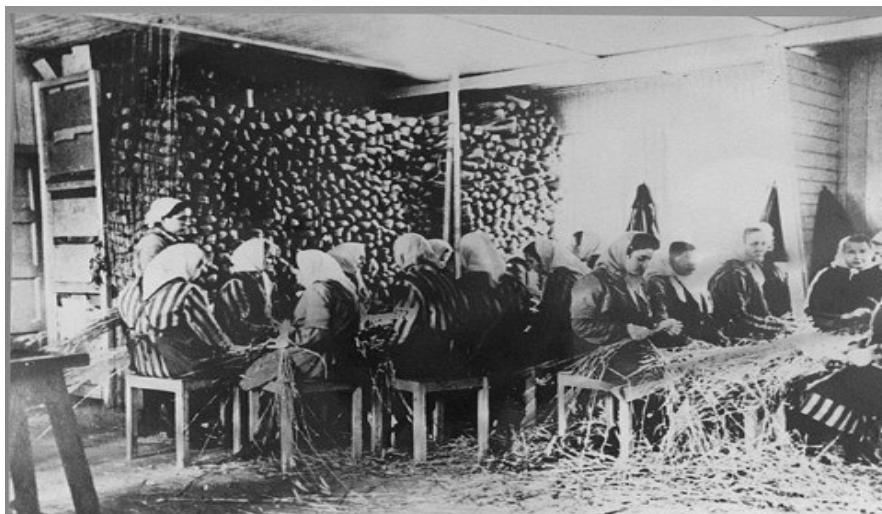
The information given below is meant to help students form some rudimentary idea of the ordeal Agnete Ottosen endured during the final years of WWII. Reading about these crimes against humanity is difficult; actually having lived through them is unimaginable.

**Frøslev** was the largest Nazi prison camp in Denmark. It was located in Padborg close to the border with Germany. Up to 12,000 Danes were imprisoned there, the majority for their political opposition to the Nazi occupiers. Political prisoners were routinely tortured by the Gestapo in an attempt to gain information that would help them squelch the Resistance. Agnete was one of those prisoners incarcerated in Frøslev who was sent on to a camp in Germany despite the fact that this broke the promise German officials had made to the Danish government that Danes would be kept on Danish soil.

She was sent to **Ravensbrück**, the only major Nazi concentration camp built specifically for women and children. The conditions of life there were as shameful and difficult as in all the other concentration camps -- death by starvation, beating, torture, hanging, and shooting happened daily. Forced labor -- often pointless and humiliating, and imposed without proper equipment, clothing, nourishment, or rest -- formed a core part of the regimen. The women at Ravensbrück worked at many kinds of slave labor, from heavy outdoor jobs to building the V-2 rocket parts for the giant German company Siemens AG.

Children, too, were forced to participate in the labours and were commonly worked to death. Indeed, the cruelty and sadism of the Nazis against the children in Ravensbrück appeared to have no limits. Newborn babies were immediately separated from their mothers and drowned or thrown into a sealed room until they died. Children were sometimes thrown alive into the crematory, buried alive, poisoned, strangled, or drowned -- often while their mothers were forced to watch. Very few of the children sent here survived the war.

Prisoners in Nazi concentration camps were sometimes used as human guinea pigs in hideous medical experiments. Ravensbrück supplied female prisoners for some of these unethical medical procedures, including experiments in sterilization. These experiments took many forms in the camps in which they were carried out. Prisoners might be injected with caustic substances or subjected to radiation from X-ray machines. Surgical experiments often resulted in mutilations. The "injuries to the female parts" Agnete endured may have been the result of one of these procedures. It is estimated that 92,000 women and children died in Ravensbrück.



Straw-shoe plaiting workshop in Ravensbrück concentration camp.

## A Production Who's Who

### CREATIVE TEAM

Playwright	<b>Sonja Mills</b>	Costume Design	<b>Joanne Dente</b>
Director	<b>Kelly Thornton</b>	Set Design	<b>Rebecca Picherack</b>
Assistant Director	<b>Ruth Madoc-Jones</b>	Sound Design	<b>Angela Da Rocha</b>
Producer	<b>Naomi Campbell</b>	Stage Manager	<b>Fiona Jones</b>
Set Design	<b>Robin Fisher</b>	Production Manager	<b>Shauna Jansson</b>

### CAST

Agnete	<b>Kate Hennig</b>
Mads	<b>Bruce Hunter</b>
Michael/Guard	<b>Clinton Walker</b>
Helga	<b>Randi Helmers</b>
Bente	<b>Christine Brubaker</b>
Various Male Roles	<b>Eric Goulem</b>
Various Female Roles	<b>Erika Hennebury</b>

*The Danish Play* was first produced in Toronto in 2002 by **Nightwood Theatre**. The oldest -- and now the only -- professional women's theatre company in Canada, Nightwood was formed in 1979 by a dynamic group of women who shared a vision of a different kind of theatre based on a collaborative working model and an image-based aesthetic. It is the nationally recognized forum for the creation of original plays written and directed by women with different economic, racial, national, sexual and social backgrounds. The company engages over 100 artists each year while Artistic Director Kelly Thornton and Artistic Producer Nathalie Bonjour keep Nightwood bureaucracy free. Nightwood is the only professional theatre company in Canada with diversity at every level of its organization.

Among the company's numerous award-winning productions the landmark *Good Night Desdemona*, (*Good Morning Juliet*) by bestselling novelist and playwright Ann-Marie MacDonald is probably the best known. *Good Night Desdemona* has received over 100 productions across North America (and Japan) and is one of the most produced plays by a woman in Canada.

Nightwood is committed to fostering the growth of emerging plays, playwrights, and theatre artists. It offers a variety of script development programs to women of all ages and from all walks of life. Groundswell, the company's internationally recognized New Play Development Program, provides workshops with professional actors, directors and dramaturges for up to ten new plays by women each year. Write From the Hip is Nightwood's play development project for young women, providing professional play creation skills to first-time writers. And Busting Out is set to run as a pilot project for ten girls aged 13-15 who want to claim their feminist selves while learning theatre skills from some of the best practitioners around the city.

For more information on Nightwood and its programs, contact [info@nightwoodtheatre.net](mailto:info@nightwoodtheatre.net); telephone: 416-944-1740; fax: 416-944-1739.



## Suggested Activities

### Pre-Show Activities

#### 1. Connecting to History

Copy and cut into six separate paragraphs the section titled **Historical Context 1: The Danish Resistance** (page 4). Number the paragraphs from one to six in chronological order. Divide your class into six groups. Give each group one paragraph and ask them to recreate in a tableau one of the historical events it describes. View each group's work in order to see an untitled series of snapshots of the history of the Danish Resistance. Then view each one again as the paragraph on which it is based is read aloud to the class.

#### 2. Role-on-the-Wall

Create a life-size outline sketch of a female figure and put it up on one wall of the classroom in an accessible location. Divide the class into three groups. Explain that they are all going to work towards building a composite character profile of Agnete Ottosen as she is represented in *The Danish Play*. Give one group copies of **An Interview with Playwright Sonja Mills** (page 9), another group the prose text from the **Life of Agnete Ottosen** (page 3), and the third group Ottosen's poem *map of the world* (also page 3).

After they've had time to read through the document they've been given, ask each group to come up with brief descriptive statements about the personality and history of Agnete based on the information in their document. Each group in turn can send a stenographer to the outline sketch on the wall who will record the findings of the group at some appropriate spot on the image. Leave the annotated outline up and add to it after viewing *The Danish Play*.

### Post-Show Activities

1. As a follow up activity, read the **Interview with Playwright Sonja Mills** (pages 9-10) to kick start your post-show discussion of the production.

2. Sonja Mills consciously modelled certain aspects of *The Danish Play* on Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale *The Wild Swans*. As a follow up to viewing the show, read *The Wild Swans* aloud to your class. List the parallels you find between the two on the board. The complete text of Andersen's tale can be found on the Aesop's Fables online collection site at <http://www.pacificnet.net/~johnr/cgi/aesop1.cgi?hca&a126>

3. Students may be curious to know about how *The Danish Play* was written after they've seen the show. Take a look at **Focus on Script Development** (page 11) for some insider detail on just how much work goes into such a finely crafted play.

## What to Watch for in This Production

1. The action in *The Danish Play* spans more than 30 years in the lives of the characters and occurs in a multiplicity of locations. How do the **set, costume, and lighting designs** work to help distinguish one time period and location from another?
2. Watch for the **symbolic use of sound** in *The Danish Play*. What symbolic effect does the repetition of certain sound patterns -- the chiming of bells, the roll call, the echoing of specific lines of dialogue -- create?
3. The original “Danish play” is of course *Hamlet*, Shakespeare’s most famous tragedy. Watch for **parallels between this dramatic version of the story of Agnete Ottosen and the one about the melancholy Dane**, e.g., behaviour that defies social norms is read as “mad”; a strong belief that things are not as they should be and a burning desire to put things right; danger and intrigue pervade the immediate environment; personal loss plunges the main character into profound grief.
4. **Is *The Danish Play* a tragedy?** Consider the vision of tragedy as it is presented in the following passages from Arthur Miller and A.C. Bradley before you make your decision:

*“[T]he tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing -- his sense of personal dignity.... The underlying struggle is that of the individual attempting to gain his ‘rightful’ position in his society...(and the tragic flaw is nothing more than)...an inherent unwillingness to remain passive in the face of what he conceives to be a challenge to his dignity, his image of his rightful status. Only the passive, only those who accept their lot without active retaliation, are ‘flawless’ ... [T]here are among us today, as there always have been, those who act against the scheme of things that degrades them, and in the process of action everything we have accepted out of fear or insensitivity or ignorance is shaken before us and examined, and from this total onslaught by an individual against the seemingly stable cosmos surrounding us -- from this total examination of the ‘unchangeable’ environment--comes the terror and the fear that is classically associated with tragedy.”*

Arthur Miller, *Tragedy and the Common Man*

*“The central feeling of Shakespearean tragedy is the impression of waste.... The pity and fear which are stirred by the tragic story seem to unite with, and even to merge in, a profound sense of sadness and mystery, which is due to this impression of waste.... We seem to have before us a type of the mystery of the whole world, the tragic fact which extends far beyond the limits of tragedy. Everywhere, from the crushed rocks beneath our feet to the soul of man, we see power, intelligence, life and glory, which astound us and seem to call for our worship. And everywhere we see them perishing, devouring one another, and destroying themselves, often with dreadful pain, as though they came into being for no other end. Tragedy is the typical form of this mystery, because that greatness of soul which it exhibits oppressed, conflicting and destroyed, is the highest existence in our view. It forces the mystery upon us, and it makes us realize so vividly the worth of that which is wasted that we cannot possibly seek comfort in the reflection that all is vanity.”*

A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*

## **An Interview with Playwright Sonja Mills** (page 1 of 2)

Sonja Mills began her career in the arts as a typesetter for the gay magazine *Body Politic* in the late 1980s. Her first sojourn into playwriting resulted in a quirky little comedy called *Dyke City*, produced in Toronto in 1994. The show spawned a critically acclaimed and wildly popular series of plays that achieved cult-hit status during a six-year, ten-episode run at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre. With 12 full-length and four short plays written and produced in the last eight years, Sonja -- a member of Tarragon Theatre's Playwriting Unit -- is now working on *Margaret Gross*, a heartbreaking comedy about dysfunctional family dynamics and the rise and fall of Imperialism.

**What are your earliest memories of the family stories about your great aunt Agnete? What aspects of her life most captured your imagination and inspired your decision to write about her?**

*I have very early memories of my mom telling me stories of what it was like to be a child during the occupation of Denmark in the early '40s, stories of ration cards and having nothing to eat for Christmas but turnips. Many of these stories made their way into the play -- Agnete's niece (my mom) telling her family she wants to go to Sweden with her Jewish friends because "they still have chocolate in Sweden," for instance. I knew from a very early age of my "heroic" great-aunt who worked for the Resistance and suffered torture at the hands of the Nazis as a result. I also knew she had a child after the war that died at the age of 15; but as in many families, we didn't talk much about the tragic aspects of our shared history.*

*It was many, many years later, when my mom got her hands on Agnete's diaries, letters and poems, that I began asking questions about some of the details. When I learned the story of the scooter, I knew there was something to write about. This woman, Agnete, does everything right (or so she thinks). But when she finally arrives at the moment when she and her son may actually be reunited -- the one event in her life that might still have represented hope and justice to her -- he is killed on the scooter she gives him. That sad twist made me want to write this story.*

**You've taken a certain amount of artistic license with the literal facts of Agnete's life. Which aspects of the story in *The Danish Play* are your creative speculations or inventions?**

*There's one little fact I've changed in the play that I feel guilty about. The "Ten Commandments" that Mads prints and distributes after the dissolution of the Danish parliament happened at the beginning of the occupation, not three years later. I changed the chronological order of the event to help build the tension in the narrative. I'm glad to get that off my chest.*

*All the other historical events are as they happened, though of course not all references to specific events or actions can be linked directly to Agnete. For instance, the involvement of the Resistance overall in the rescue of Danish Jews is well documented. Based on the reports of my Danish relatives, I know Agnete "shamed" her brother into hiding a Jewish family in his farmhouse prior to the rescue. But of course in the scene where this event is central I've speculated about her exact involvement. Similarly, I don't know her exact role in the major sabotage that was inflicted on the Luftwaffe airbase in Århus. I do know, though, that she was a runner between Aalborg and Århus during that time, and that she stole a German uniform from*

## **An Interview with Playwright Sonja Mills** (page 2 of 2)

*a dry cleaner. Many of the brief specifics exposed in the play come from the questionnaire she filled out after her rescue from Ravensbrück concentration camp, e.g., that she was caught with "weapons and a British newsreel," vague details of the surgery she endured, etc.*

*The character of Mads is based loosely on Agnete's actual employer at the time. All the other characters are invented, as is Michael's playhouse.*

**The published text of the play gives the subtitle as "a true tale of resistance", which works on several different levels. How does Agnete embody the notion of resistance? Is her singularity (independent spirit? contrariness?) a gift or a curse?**

*Though it is based on a true story, I did intend to write a "tale" -- a story with a moral that resonates, not just a factual history of a war that happened once. I also wanted to tap into the "fairytale" aspect of Denmark, that tiny kingdom of cheese and rolling hills, where fairytales were born. I couldn't have chosen a more perfect, tiny location to tell such a tiny tale, with such huge implications. I wanted to acknowledge that impossibly happy endings do exist, but not for everyone. (See if you can find all the references to H.C. Andersen's The Wild Swans. Hint: Bente's perfect husband has ten brothers).*

*Agnete didn't just resist the Nazis. She blatantly defied social norms, greed and overabundance, class- and gender-based injustice, anything that wasn't fair. In their first meeting in the play, Mads calls Agnete "disagreeable", as if it were a personality trait, not just her response to the situation.*

*Was her resistance to authority and refusal to conform a gift or a curse? Yes.*

**What would you have a young audience take away from their experience of *The Danish Play*?**

*I want young people to question authority. I will also be thrilled if this play restores some faith in the tradition of theatre in young audiences -- and old ones. When I was younger -- and even now, to be honest -- I would have been hesitant to even watch something like *The Danish Play*. A two-hour long play about a dead poet who fought in the war? Forget it! My intention in writing this piece was to create a traditional piece of theatre that asks relevant questions about our responsibilities to each other and to the future of this planet.*

*On our tour to Copenhagen with the play, I was asked many questions in press interviews about my feelings on Denmark's involvement in the war on Iraq. I have never presumed to make specific parallels between my play and current events in the world, but I was very encouraged to be faced with critics and audiences who actually, clearly understood the concepts I was trying to get at: that progress (read: "consumerism") isn't righteous or even right, that borders are a product of greed and injustice, and that flag-waving leads to war which leads to more flag-waving which leads to more war which leads to more flag-waving which leads to...*

## Focus on Script Development

It takes a couple of hours to watch *The Danish Play*, but it took playwright Sonja Mills “three long years and thirteen drafts” to recreate the events of her great aunt Agnete’s life in dramatic form. Here’s her personal account of the script development process:

*I spent the first year reading and researching. That seemed awfully indulgent at the time, but the benefits of knowing so much about that period of Danish history became very clear very fast. I contacted as many of Agnete's co-workers in the Resistance as I could find (most of them are dead). Often many hours of communication with an elderly man with a million war stories of his own would lead to one juicy tidbit about Agnete. I spoke with one fellow who was in Frøslev with Agnete. He bartered with her, giving her cigarettes (she didn't smoke but used them as currency) in exchange for darning his socks. When she delivered his socks to him through the fence, they were tied with a poem she had written him. He didn't remember the poem, but he remembered it filled him with hope... Research is hard and can be boring, but it pays off.*

*I spent the second year writing and workshopping\* several drafts of the play. I did have dramaturgical\*\* support from several sources (including Kelly Thornton, the director). The workshop process was invaluable but grueling, as it took many drafts for the play to really make sense. But no matter how unfinished I felt the piece to be, it always helped immensely to hear the script read and to dissect/discuss it with the actors.*

*The third year was spent in solitary confinement, but I have to say that the most intense script work took place in preparation for the first production. Kelly and I and the cast spent a full week finalizing the script. I wrote a completely new draft overnight (twice!). In the end, the difference between the 12th and 13th drafts was as great as between the 1st and 12th.*

*The non-linear structure\*\*\* of the play was entirely unplanned. When I first started writing scenes, I chose random points of Agnete's life and just started writing dialogue. Despite having to stick to the facts of the chronology, the step-by-step order of events was less important to me than really illustrating what was going on inside this woman's mind. I was never interested in how she was caught, for instance, or the specifics of her torture. But I was always interested in how her experiences changed her perceptions, and expectations, of the world she lived in. On the advice of Alisa Palmer, who directed one workshop on the script, I arranged the scenes into chronological order. It made no sense whatsoever, but it did help me recognize some problems in the narrative. The final order of scenes is remarkably similar to the original order.*

**\*Workshopping:** the staged reading and/or scene study of a script with actors and a director undertaken for the purpose of giving the playwright feedback on how the script may be improved.

**\*\*Dramaturgy:** the complex practice of assisting theatre companies with work related to the actual texts of the plays they produce. One aspect of contemporary Canadian dramaturgy involves providing analysis and criticism of scripts in development through individual consultations and/or group workshops.

**\*\*\*Non-linear structure:** a method of arranging the events in a story that mixes up the conventional “beginning/middle/end” order in which they would normally happen.

To watch an interview with another Canadian playwright (Stephen Massicotte, *Mary's Wedding*), find activities related to script creation, or check out an annotated list of great Canadian plays, visit the playwriting page on the NAC's ArtsAlive English Theater web site at <http://www.artsalive.ca/en/eth/playwright/index.html>

## Resources

### Print Resources

Ipsen, Anne. *A Child's Tapestry of War: Denmark 1940-1945*. Beaver's Pond Press, 1998.

Laska, Vera. *Women in the Resistance and in the Holocaust: The Voices of Eyewitnesses*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1983.

Volavková, Hana. *I Never Saw Another Butterfly: Children's Drawings and Poems from Terezín Concentration Camp 1942-1944*. New York: Schocken Books, 1978.

### On the Web

"Citizen Dane"--article on *The Danish Play* by Paul Matwychuk  
<http://www.vueweekly.com/articles/default.aspx?i=341>

"Great Kate"--review of *The Danish Play* by Jon Kaplan in Now  
[www.nowtoronto.com/issues/2002-11-21/stage\\_theatrefeature.php](http://www.nowtoronto.com/issues/2002-11-21/stage_theatrefeature.php) - 34k -

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum--excellent and highly detailed site for Holocaust education  
<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/>

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum site with a special focus on the Danish Resistance  
<http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/focus/danish/>

Hana's Suitcase--site devoted to Karen Levine's documentary about Hana Brady, a Czechoslovakian girl who perished in Auschwitz in 1944.  
[http://radio.cbc.ca/programs/thismorning/sites/people/hanassuitcase\\_010119/hana\\_main.html](http://radio.cbc.ca/programs/thismorning/sites/people/hanassuitcase_010119/hana_main.html)



Agnete Ottosen





Kate Hennig as Agnette Ottosen  
photo by John Lauener





Kate Hennig (right), Christine Brubaker (left),  
Erika Hennebury (below)  
photo by John Lauener



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