

## CONTENTS

- 1 INTRODUCTION
- 2-3 WARMING UP EXERCISES
- 4-6 IMPROVISATION
- 7-9 IMPROVISATION PUT INTO PRACTICE
- 10-12 USING SCRIPTS
- 13-14 DEALING WITH THE MANAGEMENT
- 15-17 LIGHTS, ACTIONS...AND STAGE DESIGN
- 18-19 COSTUME
- 20-21 MAKE-UP
- 22-23 MASKS
- 24-26 PROPS
- 27-29 FURTHER READING AND ADDRESSES



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Even if you've never seen Dead Poets' Society, you probably have some idea of the theme: drama can change your life. In schools, however, it has three main purposes:

- ⌘ A learning tool,
- ⌘ A means of communication,
- ⌘ for literary study (exploring texts).

## THEATRE TODAY

It's extremely difficult to attract young audiences, other than to classic 'bums on seats' productions, i.e. Curriculum texts. Visiting the theatre is often regarded as middle-class, or 'elitist', despite the working-class tradition, yet any involvement, indeed, enchantment, begins the moment the curtain rises. Plays like *Trainspotting* seemed to do the trick (or provided a bandwagon), but there is still not enough new writing, particularly anything aimed at younger audiences.

Yet studying gives people the chance to take an interest in theatre because many schools and universities pride themselves on their drama department. And acting is not just for born geniuses, as with all the Arts, hard work and competence take you a long way. Joe McGann, eldest of four brothers who all act, star of TV's *The Upper Hand*, and praised for his stage work, claims 'the gift is for getting work.'

Besides, for GCSE, a performance is not intended purely to show how clever somebody is, but results from team work, communicating an interpretation leading to discussion, feedback and evaluation. Many areas in Theatre over-lap (masks may come under costume or make-up as well as props; see below) and the integration of the whole is vital for success.

The syllabus; assessment is in two out of five areas:

- ⌘ Improvisation,
- ⌘ Scripted Performance,
- ⌘ Set Design and Lighting,
- ⌘ Costume and Make-up Design,
- ⌘ Properties (props).

Besides Actor, Designer, Lighting Designer, Costumier, Make-Up Artist and Propmaker, students need to know something about the roles of Director and Stage Manager. However, though Technology has created infinite possibilities for Sound, making it nearly as important as lighting, it is not yet included in the Syllabus. With Scripted Performance, coursework is based on two pieces from different texts; in the Controlled test, the candidate may use their own script, made available for inspection. Performance in either case may be solo or as part of a group. Props include masks, two out of three items for Coursework, one out of two in the Controlled Test.

Finally, it's important students learn how to evaluate their work, as well as that of others. The aims of the course are enjoyment and appreciation of live theatre (plus technical and historical effects) and for students to explore human experience through theatre arts, leading to an understanding of drama's place and function in Society.

## RELAXATION

We refer to things which are 'as natural as breathing', but few of us realise that learning to breathe properly makes a huge difference. 20 minutes' meditation is said to be as good for you as two hours' sleep, easing the day's accumulation of tension. It helps in other ways:

- ⌘ Overcoming negative feelings: fear, anger, pain and anxiety,
- ⌘ Accentuating the positive,
- ⌘ Assisting concentration,
- ⌘ Improving the use of your voice,
- ⌘ Finding your voice.

Stage-fright affects everyone differently: feeling sick, wobbly legs, hands and voice shake. Relaxation and breathing correctly keep you calm. Vocal exercises are essential, and not just for new vocabulary, or how to project so that the whole audience can hear. We are often influenced by people's voices; somebody incredibly good-looking with a marvellous personality scores zero if their voice gets on your nerves. It's impossible to take them seriously, and in drama, that's the kiss of death.

Making the most of your voice is essential for actors, via the appropriate games and exercises. Concentrating on using the tongue and teeth correctly improves the clarity of your diction, e.g. for devices such as stichomythia or 'verbal tennis', where two characters rapidly take turns going through a set of short lines, for comic effect or to produce tension.

There's considerable difference between conversation and dialogue, yet playwrights must create realistic speeches, which serve a purpose. Dialogue 'tells' us what's happening (and why) and about the characters, although when divulging loads of background information, plays become unconvincing. There's much experimentation with dialogue, from minimal to full-blown gibberish, and the use of the pause...made famous by Harold Pinter.

## CONCENTRATION

Like conversation, a lost art, as you will know if you've been to the cinema when people talk throughout the film. It's even worse in a theatre; one well-known actress in a West End production told off a group of noisy sixth-formers, but came in for more criticism because actors must always exercise discipline. Many people nowadays are considered to have such a short attention span that the Arts may be served up in digestible, lite portions. Not an option for practitioners, however, and acquiring these skills enables you to enjoy the Arts even more.

Having learned to relax, exercising the imagination creates mental stimulation: visualisation. At first, a guide is useful, someone to take you step by step through an elaborate scenario (sometimes referred to as 'a happy place', though not here), like a tropical beach. Once you can do this yourself, it helps you memorise the details of whatever you devise, and make it even better. Familiarity makes us careless, and anything we take for granted is a good starting point for concentration exercises.

## MEMORISING

Actors often have a great deal to remember, moves as well as lines. There is no set way of doing this, nor short cuts, but you do manage to memorise it all, AND feel brilliant when you actually perform. Be sure you understand the dialogue; nobody can remember things they're not certain about:

- ⌘ Do a bit at a time, rehearsing what you've learned as a whole; learn cues alongside lines,
- ⌘ Ask a friend to help by prompting you,
- ⌘ Practise out loud; sometimes recording the role can help.

## BUILDING UP ENERGY

The phrase 'the inner child' still sometimes perplexes people, though we all play games of some kind, and enjoy relationships with an element of playfulness. Drama means overcoming inhibitions, and it's easier to forget ourselves when having fun. Any form of trick breaks the ice, while line games encourage team work, particularly when creating your own. Games create the energy which performance draws upon.

## BUILDING UP TRUST

All actors have to believe in themselves, trust what they are doing, and place their trust in the rest of the cast. Although not everybody sees the value of games, compromise is preferable to coercion, which will have an adverse effect on the group. We each have our own perspective, so come to an agreement about what everybody needs, so they feel secure enough to produce their best work.

Starting with a safe environment, removing potential obstacles applies to personal belongings: removing jewellery and watches, working in bare feet or soft shoes. Various exercises can be carried out, in pairs, small groups or the whole group. Some may seem demanding at first - expecting somebody to catch you when you fall backwards? Working with a group gradually becomes easier, and you can monitor your progress, and that of the group itself, by the improvement in the work produced.

## EXERCISE

There are plenty of things which you must know 'like the back of your hand'. Close your eyes and describe it as fully as you can.

## IMPROVISATION

Practical work mainly involves improvisation, which is an excellent basis for warming-up exercises, though nerve-wracking in front of an audience. Obviously, done well, this is not how they see it: they're watching something being created right there and then.

### WHAT IS IMPROVISATION?

Non-scripted work in drama (or dance-drama or mime) is carried out by individuals or in a group, and it's possible to learn to improvise, though that seems contradictory. Most people daydream: turning failure into success or 'accidentally' bumping into somebody they've fancied for ages who immediately falls in love with them. We're adept at using our imagination in this way, and enjoy making things up. Scenarios for stories are conjured up the same way, as are plays.

### CREATING CHARACTERS, DIALOGUE, IDEAS

'Conventions' are ways of working in drama, the form chosen to best express meaning. 'Idea sheets' draw upon everything around us, from TV, magazines, music and travel etc. Then 'Brain-storming', when the group comes up with as many suggestions as possible, any of which set other members thinking about improvements or along different lines altogether. Everything is written down, no matter what, then eliminated by discussion until one idea is more or less agreed upon.

In 'planned improvisation', you take one situation to discover where and what happens. The character involved is created by using a convention like 'hot-seating', where everyone else in the group questions them to find out more, though they don't have to reply. This leads to:

- ⌘ Ideas,
- ⌘ Preparation,
- ⌘ Rehearsal,
- ⌘ Presentation,
- ⌘ Discussion,
- ⌘ Improvisation techniques.

With 'still images', students are asked to freeze, to focus on something in particular; in a busy scene, they can decide what is happening at that point and/or to that person. It enables exploration of abstract ideas via symbolisation, i.e., how best to represent them. 'Thought tracking' is asking somebody what their character is really thinking at that moment, to clarify motivation; members can say what they assume the character is thinking. Other people's point of view often comes as a surprise.

## FORUM THEATRE

A mix of drama and debate: one group watches the other performing, and when they stop them, the ensuing discussion dictates the progress of the piece: gaining momentum, altering direction completely or a change of actor(s). Useful for controversial or difficult subjects, to ensure everybody understands fully, it must be controlled so the drama is not constantly interrupted, and there's no bad feeling. It encourages team effort, everybody helping out to improve matters, rather than outdo each other's clever ideas.

## ROLE-PLAYS

The term used for a variety of work, like practising interviewing techniques or mastering conversation in foreign languages, technically, it's 'simulation', a rehearsal for something, the purpose being problem solving. Ranging from a familiar situation to exploring historical or geographical themes, other students can observe, using a video, if necessary, and comment accordingly.

'Group role-play' is more experimental, helping students understand different points of view via new experiences, ideas and characters. Brainstorming and hot-seating are often utilised, and it involves two groups, as conflict is an integral part, with no spectators.

In both forms, evaluation is required, to consider whether the outcome was successful, the roles realistic etc.

## MIRROR IMAGES

One useful skill is 'reflection', where the actor must think deeply about a character, and as that character:

- ⌘ How the performance came about,
- ⌘ What it was about,
- ⌘ Where can it go from here.

Reflection works well in small groups, where everyone can get involved. Nowadays, people are apt to make snap judgements, 'sound-bites', rather than take time for in depth analysis and considered opinion. Keeping a drama diary is helpful, detailing practicalities, noting the progress of your work, and how you feel about it. A journal is one way of 'writing in role', where you explore a character (motivation and situation) by composing letters, creating a short story etc.

Games to encourage reflection include the 'Judgement Chair': one person in a given situation listens to what other characters think of them, good or bad. Students can voice their own opinion, and the character explains themselves, in role. Brief comments may be extended into monologues, which require rehearsal - and reflection: what you are going to say, and why.

Similarly, in 'Conscience Alley', which provides a focus, whilst exploring conflict and different interpretations, each person in turn thinks out loud what a particular character might feel at a certain moment. They may adopt other roles: parent, best friend etc.

## 'TEACHER' IN ROLE'

Teachers can learn things too, in charge of a class or helping them take charge of themselves, encouraging students to ask questions, and provide answers. Adopting high status to begin, when in complete control (master/servant, to put it simply), they go on to middle status, conceding control to a student, to create a more equal situation, or even low status, where the class makes the decisions. If including a second teacher, there are even more possibilities. This convention is introduced gradually, indicating clearly start and finish, and authenticated i.e. whatever role is adopted should be realistic.

## EXERCISE

As the drummer in a band, write a monologue about a member deciding to quit when the latest release does not go straight to number 1.

## IMPROVISATION PUT INTO PRACTICE

Improvisational skills:

- ⌘ Paying close attention,
- ⌘ Thinking on your feet,
- ⌘ Working well with others, giving their ideas consideration,
- ⌘ Avoiding the temptation to be clever/funny/trying too hard,
- ⌘ Maintaining your 'status', whether high or low (cool/nerd etc.).

Status is the key to drama, the basis of relationships, whether two equals or, more often, dominance/subservience.

It's difficult to get used to believing in your instincts, but improvisation is more than entertainment, aiming to create characters and scenes, generating ideas and exploring situations. It helps us understand the structure of drama, and to find out about ourselves.

## GOOD IDEAS

No point sitting around waiting for that elusive thing, inspiration, to appear; ideas can always be conjured up. Some seem pretty feeble but develop into something exciting - you never know where they'll lead. Look at *Whose line...* which uses tried and tested improvisational devices: mixing genre (science fiction; romance) with characters (cowboys; pop stars) or coming up with alternative descriptions for props.

## PLAYING GAMES

Where creativity is concerned, games (mental and physical) serve a serious purpose, and they're vital in drama, having a similar basis:

- ⌘ Role-play,
- ⌘ Learning rules (and sticking to them),
- ⌘ Working with other people,
- ⌘ Trusting other people,
- ⌘ Creating energy,
- ⌘ Providing inspiration.

Some people feel work is not truly creative unless it springs from inspiration. Anything evolving from an exercise may appear artificial, unsatisfactory, but good ideas generate excitement. Try and sharpen all five senses, cultivate a heightened awareness of everything around you.

Writers are urged to think 'What if...' to encourage creativity. Newspapers provide plenty; the 1998 novel *Damascus* was based on events reported in *The Times* on November 1st, 1993. Photographs are evocative: who are these people? What will become of them? Or magazine advertisements, particularly the obscure ones where anything could be happening. Everybody feels more comfortable sticking to what they know, but picture what it would be like if you came from another part of the world (or even another planet). Explore areas that are new to you, note the feelings which result.

## MAKING NOTES

Writers are meant to keep a notebook on them 'just in case', and it's useful practice for coursework:

- ⌘ Commentary on your feelings about the progress of your work,
- ⌘ Notes about the work,
- ⌘ Potential ideas,
- ⌘ Problems and possible solutions; checking whether they worked,
- ⌘ There's no 'I' in team.

You can't expect to like everybody you meet (or that they'll like you, for that matter), but you need to get along. Learning to work as a group is essential; drama is utilised in therapy to enable participants to develop social skills. Some people are never backward in coming forward, while others stay in the background, reluctant to get involved, and for group improvisation to be successful, this needs sorting out. Games give everyone more of an equal chance.

## WORKING IN SMALL GROUPS

Some suggestions for the whole group are also useful for smaller groups, or pairs, especially when helping members to build up confidence. They may be as effective when the group is split into two, each with a different aim. When they swap round, members can pursue a project from two opposing sides, to understand it better.

## WORKING IN PAIRS

Sticking with the same partner could mean wasting time messing about, or work becomes more predictable. Pairing off with different people leads to fresh ways of thinking things up and working them out, particularly useful because dialogue is often between two people. As conflict is the driving force in drama, as well as learning to work together, improvisations should incorporate something where you are in opposition. Avoid 'blocking', i.e. repeatedly rejecting the other person's ideas, which prevents development. Instead, come up with alternatives which allow them to continue, along different lines. Otherwise, the result is real conflict.

## EVALUATION

It's often easier to assess other people's work than our own but although we are quicker to spot their mistakes (described using constructive criticism, NOT snide comments), we learn from our own. Evaluation is the key to understanding, and in improvisation, helps clarify situations. Writing things down helps you concentrate on aspects of work which need attention: why and how, whether the work itself, or how to improve your performance. Consider areas where you felt you'd get stuck, or which led to more ideas, or could have been done differently.

Evaluating the work of others applies to any form of drama (TV, theatre or cinema). Note things which are particularly good, but don't go on about minor details rather than what's relevant:

- ⌘ Can you follow what is happening?
- ⌘ Is everything properly organised?
- ⌘ Is it easy to see and hear the performance?
- ⌘ Are the characters convincing?

## EXERCISE

Pick a card, any card, and use the picture, the number or the suit as a starting point for improvisation, noting down different ideas: hearts >chocolates>diet>fashion>flares>70s>....

The 20th century is often said to belong to the director rather than the actor or the playwright. There's more to directing than organising the traffic on stage, as it were, and many productions have become famous, if not notorious, for their direction.

## THE ROLE OF DIRECTOR

The director plays as many parts as the actor - including that of the actor:

- ⌘ disciplinarian (slave-driver),
- ⌘ expert (scapegoat),
- ⌘ communicator/interpreter,
- ⌘ friend/counsellor,
- ⌘ The play's the thing,
- ⌘ which play,
- ⌘ New, experimental work,
- ⌘ tried and tested classics,
- ⌘ a radical interpretation of an old favourite,
- ⌘ re-discovering a hidden work of genius,

One particular work or writer or theme may be popular, but other considerations include the practical (roles/members ratio) and the political (female playwrights or those from other cultures). A short questionnaire gives everybody more chance for input than a discussion, to ensure general agreement:

- ⌘ You have the technology (suitable staging, equipment and resources),
- ⌘ You have enough information (sufficient research carried out in advance),
- ⌘ The choice is challenging and exciting as well as interesting,
- ⌘ It is suitable for the group's abilities,
- ⌘ The chosen script is studied inside out; the initial read-through demands the attention of all those involved.

Views differ about comparing a particular play with previous productions (TV, film or theatre), although you can learn more, noting similar ideas or at which points you differ. In one politically correct production of *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock was most sympathetic but at the expense of Portia, Bassanio and Antonio, who thus became the villains of the piece, yet the Prince of Morocco was made a figure of fun.

## CASTING

Solely your responsibility, or the teacher's, everything else seems easy by comparison. All groups have their star performers, though they shine brightly as a result of everyone else's work, but some people believe everybody should take turns. This is disastrous where they are manifestly unsuited for a main role; asking for a character's CV will indicate whether somebody really understands them, or even for a sentence summing them (and the play) up. Those with genuine acting talent usually make the most of a small role (and outshine the lead, if you do not choose carefully):

- ⌘ Specialist skills: musical ability etc.,
- ⌘ General skills: improvisation; creativity etc.,
- ⌘ Physique,
- ⌘ Response to direction and to working with others.

Ask everybody to deliver a short extract and perform some suitable tasks, to help match people and roles. You could experiment with a workshop, since this is useful for tackling the difficult bits, and serves as a preliminary rehearsal. The group must function as a company; you may know them well enough to consider dispensing with auditions, but it's good experience all round.

## REHEARSING

A cast which won't take things seriously affects rehearsals. Without proper organisation, things go wrong, and everyone starts to lose confidence; regular feedback is vital, since sharing problems and considering other people's solutions means more involvement. Everybody should be allowed either to pass or to have their say in turn, without getting too personal. Nobody else should interrupt, whether yeah or nay, the main points being discussed at the end. Sometimes even the best ideas have to go, and it's easier if the majority agree.

Criticism works better on a one-to-one basis, in private, and as things arise; don't present people with a list of shortcomings; avoid embarrassing or antagonising them. As well as the relevant points for each actor, there are those for lighting, design etc. plus general notes from rehearsal. Always give praise where it's due.

## PRODUCTION MEETINGS

These discussions take place prior to rehearsals, between director, designer and stage manager, with the help of a model or a plan, to draw up a checklist:

- ⌘ Scene changes and rehearsal notes,
- ⌘ Costumes and props,
- ⌘ Lighting, sound and design,
- ⌘ Provisional at first, everything needs carefully planning to allow ample time for rehearsals. Decisions should be typed up and copies distributed.

## REHEARSAL SCHEDULE

Ensure the ending is as well rehearsed as the opening, and keep a strict time-table; discipline is vital. You also need to rehearse any routines, e.g., fight scenes or song and dance. A 'line run' before moves are incorporated makes the latter easier.

Each rehearsal comprises:

- ⌘ Warming up exercises,
- ⌘ Quick run-through of last rehearsal, to lead into the new session, including a discussion of notes to update the cast,
- ⌘ Improvisation/rehearsal,
- ⌘ Feedback or question and answer session,
- ⌘ Notes, to be handed over before the next session,
- ⌘ Stage directions.

These don't provide the director with all the answers, but give a good indication of what the writer had in mind; a script is a set of instructions. The actor gets a clearer idea of a particular character (likewise those involved with costume and make-up) and the designer can picture the set. Complicated directions make plays hard to read, let alone interpret, although there don't appear to be many in Shakespeare. Since his work covered all aspects of theatre, he probably came up with suggestions there and then.

Dialogue frequently provides information as to what is going on, what the character should be doing, and how they are feeling. Once you've agreed on an interpretation of the text, stick to it and make sure the actor concerned fully understands.

## BLOCKING

Positioning the actors on stage is done by suggesting basic moves, the best use of space. Similarly, the director does NOT tell actors how to say a line, but enables them to decide how to say it. Merely copying what to say, rather than believing in the lines, makes for wooden acting.

The moves must make sense where character and situation are concerned, especially during entrances and exits, but also have a high visual appeal for the audience, without blocking their view of anything important. The cast learn to stay in character when the focus is elsewhere, not so much that it upstages the actor currently in the spotlight, nor so little that it distracts, i.e. start fidgeting.

There must be a reason for moving, or it appears as jarring as standing stock-still. Don't arrange the cast in lines or patterns without good reason; think about body language, how people feel about having their 'personal space' invaded - that's why when two people fall out, their behaviour is described as 'standoffish'.

## EXERCISE

Choose a short piece: how many contrasting ways of directing can you come up with?

## DEALING WITH THE MANAGEMENT

The job of Stage Manager (SM) is one of the most onerous in Theatre: jack of all trades AND master of every one of them, including 'managing', i.e. supervising other people, both cast and crew. This one person is in charge of everything backstage:

- ⌘ Lighting and sound,
- ⌘ Any special effects,
- ⌘ Costume and props.

The SM is responsible for the performance, co-ordinating cast and crew, signalling all their cues, and even deputises for the director, if necessary, to ensure there are no radical changes. The Deputy (DSM) and Assistants (ASM) act as 'understudies', concentrating on certain areas: prompting, props etc., although in small companies, these are the SM's jobs.

## THE ROLE OF SM

- ⌘ Liaising with the director, designer, lighting and sound designer and organising suitable timetables; in a group, the SM may well be the designer, director, etc.
- ⌘ Liaising between director and cast, cast and crew, crew and director, providing advice and information, calming people down.
- ⌘ A talent for tact is useful for the many over-lapping areas in theatre; problems range from each department claiming the credit to everyone passing the buck.
- ⌘ Ensuring the director, designer and/or actor's dream production keeps pace with reality and the budget: money, time and energy.
- ⌘ Arranging the rehearsal schedule and convenient rehearsal rooms with suitable facilities, e.g. refreshments and heating.
- ⌘ Organising scenery and props; maintaining the list.
- ⌘ Keeping wardrobe, actors and designer informed about costume fittings. Finding space for any complicated costume changes.
- ⌘ Attending rehearsals, marking out the floor to show the position of scenery and furniture. Making (and updating) rehearsal notes.
- ⌘ Prompting. The prompt book is a complete record of the production, as well as providing cues during the performance, and must be legible and kept safe.
- ⌘ Recording the actors' moves as they are blocked, pencilling them in to allow for changes during rehearsals. They are then used at the start of the prompt copy with which the SM runs the production.
- ⌘ Organising the Get-in and Get-out, i.e. setting up the stage and removing everything afterwards.
- ⌘ Taking charge of the Technical Rehearsal ('tech' or 'stagger-through'), which stops each time there's a problem, to sort it out there and then (wobbly scenery etc.); the lights are plotted and all technicalities tried and tested. The director stops the action but the SM starts it up again, whether re-doing the scene or making a decision about any snags. It does NOT mean re-writing the entire production.

The Dress Rehearsal is like an actual performance, sometimes combined with the 'tech' if time is short; another alternative is to have a shorter 'tech', concentrating on problem areas. The director observes, taking notes if necessary; from the final dress rehearsal onwards, the SM is in complete control. Standing in for any actors who drop out when there's no under-study, i.e. Acting Stage Manager. Traditionally, this used to be the bottom rung for aspiring actors, but a talent for the technical side is called for nowadays.

## SUPPORT ROLES

### DSM

Stage management teams consist of at least three people, the minimum being two; the SM has to have an understudy. In theory, the SM supervises while the DSM actually runs the show.

### ASM

ASMs help the SM with the get-in, but usually look after props, or help make them:

- ⌘ personal prop,
- ⌘ those passed on to another actor,
- ⌘ when and where props are needed by the actors,
- ⌘ when props need to be disposed of.

Even actors will lower themselves to retrieve items accidentally left behind on stage. The SM sometimes delegates the running of a rehearsal or certain sections of the scene changes to the ASM.

During rehearsal, the ASM moves about on stage, constantly double-checking, the DSM is in the prompt corner, and the SM goes back and forth to check stage and auditorium, watching part of each performance, to check on the finished product(ion).

## EXERCISE

Choose one scene from any play and devise a worst case scenario, listing everything which could go wrong and how you would solve all the problems.

## HAVING DESIGNS

Again, plays may receive more praise for design than the acting, whether it's virtually a bare stage or the most elaborate setting. Some designs remain unchanging throughout; the most complex combine a variety of scenes, highlighted as the need arises, interior, exterior, or even set in a different country.

The designer has to think up something which is practical yet enhances the play's meaning and style; nowadays, there's a metaphorical dimension, conjuring up the atmosphere which increases audience appreciation. The acclaimed production of *Medea*, starring Diana Rigg, took place on a stage surrounded by huge metal sheets. When Jason discovers she murdered their children, they collapse - his world comes crashing down.

## EXAM REQUIREMENTS

Design:

- ⌘ Controlled test: Sketches and scale model based on ground plan,
- ⌘ Coursework: Set design and model,
- ⌘ Lighting,
- ⌘ Controlled test: sketch of performance area and lighting plan (precise moment in text), showing understanding of colour, use of symbols, all equipment etc.,
- ⌘ Coursework: lighting plan with sketch of performance area to show lighting at one precise moment,
- ⌘ Health and safety factors must be taken into consideration, as with costume and props,
- ⌘ Nuts and bolts,
- ⌘ Budget,
- ⌘ Resources,
- ⌘ Space.

Like acting and direction, design is down to interpretation, and a well-known piece is always a challenge. The answer is in the text, especially with specific stage directions:

- ⌘ Where does the play take place?
- ⌘ When is it set?
- ⌘ What period of time is involved (daytime, passage of time etc.)?
- ⌘ What use of colour is involved?
- ⌘ What kind of interior furnishings are required?
- ⌘ What kind of landscape for exterior scenes?

## MAKING SPACE

Theatres vary, but all stages can be divided into a grid:

- ⌘ Up; Centre; Left
- ⌘ Down; Right; Stage

Hence CS = Centre Stage, DSL is Down Stage Left. Designers use a variety of symbols, covering all kinds of items from furniture (a sofa) to scenery (open archway)

Many school halls have the traditional proscenium arch framing the stage. The shape of the stage determines the basic design; 'in the round' must look good from every angle, 'promenade', from three sides. The model set can be utilised for lighting by taking photographs from different angles to judge the effect, check problems with shadows etc.

## SHEDDING A LITTLE LIGHT

Lighting is time-consuming and demanding, during planning as well as production. The lighting plan means a lot of experimentation, so it's built up in layers, using a ground plan, tracing paper and a stencil to cut out symbols for the shape of each light. These contain the number of the colour filter, and the focal point of the light is written next to it, with a note of the number of the dimmer channel.

Lighting is used to enhance atmosphere and mood, and for symbolisation, beyond that of a rosy glow for happy endings. During a monologue, that character is spotlighted, whilst in a multiple setting, the stage is in darkness, except where the action currently takes place. Colour, produced by tinting lights with 'gels' (or filters) create a variety of effects, from high noon to a rainy evening by the beach, some just for one scene, or one character. Firelight, candles, lightening etc. can make or break a scene, as can the contrast between light and dark.

## EQUIPMENT

Lighting depends on the source available; portable lighting systems are more common in schools and colleges:

- ⌘ Control system (usually an electronic switchboard), incorporating separate circuits and dimmers (for fading in and out; gradual transition from brightness to darkness ensures the audience isn't startled by a sudden change - unless this is the effect required)
- ⌘ Batten: a row of lamps, such as the floodlights; each circuit can be fitted with different colour filters
- ⌘ Lanterns: Floods (general lighting) and Spots: Fresnel (soft beam); Profile (more intense)

Lights can be tilted (up and down) and panned (side to side), and need careful positioning for the best results: for proscenium stages:

- ⌘ Centre stage; downstage and apron; upstage cyclorama: the backcloth (generally white) hung at the rear of the stage as background or sky.
- ⌘ Lighting the cyclorama creates a dramatic effect, and used without front lighting produces a silhouette.

As for problems, consider the audience as well as the stage. Dazzling performances should not be set in a drawing room where light reflects off the metal frame of the family photograph.

## LIGHTING REHEARSAL

From the initial blackout, when the lights are gradually brought up to the first setting, all cues are plotted and marked on the script, then amended as necessary. Although different angles have already been tried out, some experimentation may still be called for, plus the strength of the light (level). The designer, lighting operator and SM must agree on the cueing; the designer, director and SM need plans of the number and colour position of each light.

Initially, designer and director discuss requirements, with the aid of the set model, then the director explains what is needed, so all lights focus on the most useful area:

- ⌘ Time of day,
- ⌘ Setting,
- ⌘ Mood/atmosphere,
- ⌘ Any special effects.

The electricians must be informed about the main acting areas and the position of furniture and furnishings (doors, windows etc.). They need a list of the effects needed, and a text showing entrances and exits and sound cues. The designer and some of the cast in costume attend the rehearsal, so the lighting design can be checked that it works properly.

## EXERCISE

Most of us would love to see a favourite book filmed, or staged. Choose one descriptive passage and one where the setting is largely left to your imagination, and draw up the designs. Which was more difficult?

## COSTUME

Many productions receive acclaim because of their weird and wonderful costumes, and creating and making them calls for originality, whether for utmost simplicity or staggering complexity, whether your own costume or for the group.

Costume provides immediate clues to the world of the play, comedy or tragedy, from when and where it is set. The first impression, obviously, is of the actual character: rich or poor, conventional or eccentric etc. We wear clothes for particular reasons, from attending a party to clearing out the attic, to help us fit in with others or ensure we stand out from the crowd. Costume evokes somebody's age and personality and (like the set) style and fashion, in both a personal and historical sense.

Colour has particular connotations, from red hot to cool blue, along with pattern and shape: slenderness for the austere, the ultra fashionable etc. Accessories or personal props accentuate character traits; take 'A handbag?' - is it brand new or old and battered; tiny or kitchen sink sized?

## CLOTHES MAKETH THE MAN

And the woman; actors say their character begins at the feet, i.e. how somebody walks reveals a lot about them; wearing a Victorian crinoline rather than leggings slows you down, automatically more in keeping with that period. Even people who live in jeans feel different when they dress up, and vice versa. Rehearsal clothes should help actors get into character, and a change of costume is not purely to show off a performer's wardrobe; take the yellow stockings Malvolio foolishly dons in Twelfth Night.

A bit of ingenuity and some idea about materials are as handy as an ability to sew. Many items can be re-cycled, not just by dyeing them, but utilising various parts: a skirt lengthened by adding a deep flounce, a long sleeved top turned into a waistcoat. It's amazing what can be acquired from jumble and car boot sales, Oxfam etc., but in case of storage problems, limit yourself to useful articles, rather than accumulating stuff which might come in handy one day.

Making a check-list:

- ⌘ What resources are available (time and money)?
- ⌘ Are the costumes appropriate?
- ⌘ Are they practical: comfortable to wear, and easy to change in and out of?
- ⌘ Are they suitable for a character who is constantly on the move, or for unusual purposes such as jumping around?
- ⌘ Are they cheap and effective, i.e., recognisable, but not stereotypical?

## ADDRESSING A PRODUCTION

Planning basic details:

- ⌘ Check the space available: room to work, to store tools (from an ironing board to pins and needles) and the costumes (with their accessories),
- ⌘ Study the play and carry out any necessary research,
- ⌘ Make notes about the character(s),
- ⌘ Rough out designs, using a computer if possible. Tracing catalogue pictures of models comes in handy for sketches; a light box illuminates the picture from behind so it can be copied directly on to the paper. To check how costumes will look, cut out one sample sketch and slide fabric underneath.
- ⌘ Discussions with director and designer,
- ⌘ Start collecting material, trimmings (ribbons, buttons etc.) and accessories; include fabric swatches to compare colours and check whether the material is easy to work with. Cultivate local businesses; always ask around,
- ⌘ Measure up the cast, without disrupting rehearsals, i.e. in a separate room nearby,
- ⌘ Dress parade and dress rehearsal,

The latter is essential, a practice run of the performance, NOT a review of the costumes, which is the purpose of the parade (if time allows). The cast wears each costume in turn for the designer and the director to iron out any problems, as it were; quite often, the actors suggest something which has been overlooked.

It should be held under the proper lighting, and observed from the auditorium to judge the effect on the audience: do set and costume complement one another or are there any clashes in colour or design? Hopefully, all goes well, since it's at this point photo calls with the local media are arranged, good publicity for the school.

## EXERCISE

Jeans and T shirt are something of a uniform, but how many variations could you come up with, to show different characters besides Heavy Metal fans.

## MAKING UP IS SO-O-O HARD TO DO

Everyday use of cosmetics can effect a transformation, but theatre calls for more spectacular results. Because of the brightness of stage lighting, without make-up, the cast's faces would look flat, pale, and unhealthy, and lack character. Under the brow, cheek and chin need emphasising, and lighting causes odd effects (brown eye-shadow makes eyes seem smaller), particularly when coloured gels are used; red lipstick looks even darker under a greenish light.

Make-up is adapted according to where the production takes place; for a small stage, it's similar to what's worn for a party. Generally, the audience isn't expected to notice a character's make-up, but you can create some unusual effects, particularly in historical plays, fantasy and science-fiction; you even need make-up to look as if you're not wearing any. Some productions require a co-ordinating make-up for all the cast, i.e. stylized, to produce a dramatic effect.

## MAKE-UP KIT

The average teenage girl collects enough cosmetics to supply any company, but not all of it is suitable; stage make-up should come from theatrical suppliers, and neutral shades are probably better. Cosmetics and make-up routines are available for all colours of skin: Hispanic, Oriental and Black.

It's as important to have the necessary products to remove make-up, especially when you're male. A basic kit should comprise:

- ⌘ Make-up removal creams,
- ⌘ Toner or astringent, used underneath foundation to avoid stickiness (and spots),
- ⌘ Foundation: fluid, cream, cream sticks or cake, a shade darker than your own skin for women; two shades for men,
- ⌘ Shader for browbone, nose and cheekbones; highlighter for the centre of the nose, cheekbones, under eyes (to conceal shadows; it can also hide other skin blemishes),
- ⌘ Powder,
- ⌘ Powder and cream eye-shadow; eye-liner and mascara; false eye-lashes,
- ⌘ Blusher; lipsticks and liners, preferably in soft red or a peach shade.

## EQUIPMENT

Much of the following can be bought at the chemist's:

- ⌘ hair colourants, gel etc. sponges, tissues, cotton wool,
- ⌘ Assorted make-up brushes,
- ⌘ Plus material for special effects: stage blood; sweat; putty (for false noses etc.); padding.

## CREATING A LOOK

The make-up you devise for your chosen character can be demonstrated on another person, but should be discussed first with the director and designer. You'll need an image, whether from a colour photograph or your own drawing or painting, to draw up a chart to show the structure of the face and the more prominent details, brow to chin. Hair is also important: you can style it or use a wig (home-made or bought).

Practice until the design seems to fit in with the character's face, and they (or you) feel comfortable with it. Most make-ups follow the same pattern:

- ⌘ Tonic,
- ⌘ Foundation,
- ⌘ Shading and highlighting, to alter the basic shape,
- ⌘ Powder and rouge,
- ⌘ Eye make-up, to alter the shape (heavy lids for a languorous character), and ensure they can be seen from a distance,
- ⌘ The mouth should not detract from the eyes but show a character's personality and moods; it may need to appear fuller or thinner,
- ⌘ Hair: wigs, glue-on moustaches and beards, the latter is built up in layers to look more realistic, and attached with spirit gum,
- ⌘ Hands and body complement the face: aged, tanned or muscular, as required.

## EVERYDAY MAKE-UP AND SPECIAL EFFECTS

One interesting make-up is for a riches-to rags character, whose face reflects their misfortunes during the play: dirty, weary and unhealthy. Or contrasting make-up, such as rich and poor characters. Make-up from a variety of periods and cultures is often popular, from Egyptian to 70s Punk (each decade seems to have a distinctive look), plus Fantasy and Science-Fiction, even animals.

When ageing a character, don't over-do it, making them grotesque rather than elderly; the actor screws up their face for you to draw in the wrinkles, using thin lines fading out at each end. Reversing the process (rejuvenation) does not work in a small theatre. Any children should look their age, and not appear like mini adults with loads of blue eye-shadow and bright lipstick. Boys especially should have a natural look.

If the piece calls for an unfortunate character to suffer, you can get some amazing results, wounds which appear very realistic (scars are built up using tissues). But before you start getting blood-thirsty, keep in mind the effect on the audience - a sudden shock is apt to cause an outbreak of nervous giggles.

## EXERCISE

How unusual a make-up can you create, using a minimal amount of cosmetics?

## MAKING TRANSFORMATIONS

A mask allows you to become somebody else, or to be truly yourself, not the person others are used to seeing. The face features prominently in drama and masks are excellent for transformation, quicker than using cosmetics.

Dating back to early times, they had a practical purpose, worn as disguise whilst pursuing a particular animal, and for ritual or religion, to inspire reverence (or terror), even protection, by concealing identity. Masks are also regarded as romantic and glamorous, popularised by festival and carnival. In Venice, entire shops are given over to them; the basic white face, with ornamentation added, results in amazing variety.

Masks range from towering head-dresses (which may allow for part of the face to be seen, or serve as a surround to the face) to one relatively small item which alters the face, even a false nose. Flat or contoured, they can be enhanced with some kind of hat - or several, to demonstrate a versatile character. The type of mask is also determined by the use of dialogue, when a half-mask or a mask held on a stick (sometimes reversible) is more convenient.

## SPECIAL EFFECTS

One simple but striking use of masks is a common theme, e.g. when the whole cast wears the same outfit, like black leggings and T shirt, to match their identical (stylized) expressions, e.g. the traditional Greek masks of comedy and tragedy.

Masks are excellent for:

- ⌘ Fantasy and science fiction,
- ⌘ Caricature (e.g. spitting image),
- ⌘ Type (the good fairy; pirates),
- ⌘ Stereotype (e.g. the boffin in the lab),
- ⌘ Personification (objects, such as flowers; abstract ideas, like vices and virtues).

## ANIMAL, MINERAL, VEGETABLE...

A simple answer to animal costumes, masks conjure up immediate recognition, even when combined with everyday clothing. Hands and feet may resemble paws, and the mask can be more like a hat, for on top of the head. Should costume be a necessity, a more elaborate mask, probably a head-dress will be required, allowing for the anthropomorphic aspect, i.e. whether it has a speaking, rather than a walk-on, role. This can be used with costumes constructed on a frame (wire, hoop, cardboard) for creatures such as snakes, dinosaurs or monsters.

By contrast, a neutral (expressionless) mask concentrates attention on the movement of head and body. These can be bought but are easily made from thick white card. Sticking a face cut out from a magazine to the card creates a 'flat character' mask, although pictures of celebrities create a ready-made identity.

Masks, often papier mâché, can serve as 'dressings' in certain settings, e.g. a 'bas relief', a prominent wall decoration, for the fountain in an Ancient Roman courtyard.

## MASK MAKING

Comfort is a must. Being able to put up with making a cast of your own face to use as a mould (and some people loathe having their face completely covered) makes wearing the mask more endurable by comparison. But the mould can be used time and again, for all kinds of 'faces', and it fits properly.

Most people find wearing masks disorientating at first. Don't make it worse with something which cuts into you or chafes, or is so heavy it gives you a head-ache; Yoruban masks worn by African tribes are several feet high AND wide (and scary looking). Another disadvantage is that masks affect movement, not only when supporting something huge on your head, but when facing the audience the whole time. You have to be able to use your body, hands especially, to be more expressive and convey emotions.

There are a number of ways of creating masks; hair can be made from a variety of materials: wood shavings, paper; string etc.:

- ⌘ Plasticine for masks with a few features,
- ⌘ Papier mâché: eye masks and half-face masks. Used with a balloon, build up a solid head or cut it in half for two face masks,
- ⌘ Balloon, string and glue for crowns and head-dresses,
- ⌘ Cloth mâché (e.g., cheesecloth and a thinned glue mix),
- ⌘ Clay model,
- ⌘ Wire mask (slightly stronger, and more versatile for decoration),
- ⌘ Wire mesh covered in material or foam rubber (animal heads, carnival masks),
- ⌘ Even a brown paper bag, with holes cut out for eyes and mouth can do the trick. Then gather together any appropriate household or craft material, from bottle tops to buttons, and let your imagination get to work.

## EXERCISE

Create a design for something very small, like an eye mask, or one which is big as you can comfortably manage.

## PROPERTIES

Commonly known as props, they come in all shapes and sizes and for various purposes: movable objects, ranging from furnishings and furniture, to ornaments:

- ⌘ large props, from the kitchen sink onwards, furnish a stage,
- ⌘ dressings decorate it (pictures etc., stuck in place if necessary, e.g. in a farce),
- ⌘ hand props.

## PROPPING UP THE PLAY

Props are vital; like a close-up on TV or film, any object on stage is automatically assumed to be significant. Research must be carried out to ensure authenticity, and this also inspires ideas. Notes kept in a file, together with pictures where appropriate, form a resource for future productions.

Some items look real, others, like equipment, actually have to be used. The latter, if home-made, must be constructed strongly enough to last (a stock of replacements may also be necessary, e.g. ornaments smashed during each performance).

Props include:

- ⌘ Costume accessories (jewellery, crowns etc.),
- ⌘ Ornaments (including clocks, frames etc.); kitchenware and goblets; food items,
- ⌘ Musical instruments; paper items (books),
- ⌘ Furniture (thrones, chairs),
- ⌘ Street and garden furniture (signposts, fountains),
- ⌘ Lights (lamps, candle-sticks),
- ⌘ Landscapes (trees, shrubs, rocks),
- ⌘ monumental (anything architectural: statues, pillars).

## ORGANISING PROPS

The initial list is modified according to requirements, which emerge during rehearsals. The designer (who chooses major items such as furniture), the prop maker and the stage manager need to liaise, plus the director, for practical props. Rehearsal props, though temporary, should resemble the actual item. Replacements may be necessary if the 'real prop' is fragile, which also allows for experimentation, to ensure props work as they should. Anything which is replaced, advise the cast so they're not distracted when coming upon something different.

The stage manager keeps the designer informed about amendments, and keeps the checklist updated. Props take a lot of organising, sometimes more than anything else:

- ⌘ Which props,
- ⌘ Position on stage,
- ⌘ When they are used,
- ⌘ What they are for.

Scenes used to close with curtains drawn, but nowadays, it's fascinating watching cast and crew at work, positioning props ('setting') and removing them ('striking'). This is either as unobtrusive as possible, or choreographed, virtually incorporated into the play.

## PLOTTING THE PROPS

The 'check plot' lists the position of every single item, at any point, with drawings for those set in a particular way:

- ⌘ On stage,
- ⌘ Off stage,
- ⌘ In the actor's possession.

As well as a check plot for the beginning, some are included for the intervals or any point where a number of props are moved around.

'Running plots' are for props needing to be moved in a particular sequence; fragile items before changes of scenery:

- ⌘ cues for props to be set or struck,
- ⌘ props to be handed to actors or collected from them.

When there's a lot of hand props, they're laid out on tables in the wings. And if an actor exits bearing gifts (or something fragile), somebody stands by to retrieve them because they can't see properly. Personal props are sometimes kept in the actors' dressing-rooms, and care should be taken so they're not mislaid.

## DESIGNING AND CREATING PROPS

Sometimes, models are required for large props before manufacture; sketches should be sufficient for smaller items (specialised items are usually purchased or borrowed, not made).

Prop making starts with an eagle eye, particularly for a bargain; fans of Blue Peter (and the Environment) will come into their own. Re-cycling material, especially newspapers, is excellent for creating props, though it depends on where they can be stored and manufactured. Even with plenty of space, it should be organised into several clearly defined working areas, to avoid completed props being damaged. Storage areas need clearly labelling, with the contents arranged in groups, paintpots to storage chests for the bigger items.

## WASTE NOT, WANT NOT

Props encompass a huge assortment of materials:

- ⌘ Paper and card: from plans to papier mâché,
- ⌘ Cloth (liaise with the costume designer),
- ⌘ Wood: soft and hard,
- ⌘ Metal: including wire (in different thicknesses) and mesh,
- ⌘ Modelling material: plasticine to plaster.

And what you need to use on said materials, plus running water and a source of heat:

- ⌘ Tools (primarily woodworking),
- ⌘ Fillers (for shaping scenery and props),
- ⌘ Fasteners: adhesives; tape and string; nails etc.,
- ⌘ Decorating: paints, brushes etc.

You'll need to call upon various skills, including design, arts and crafts, and ingenuity: ever notice that some washing-up bottle tops look like the trigger of a gun? Making props can be one of the most fascinating jobs in Theatre.

## EXERCISE

Design one fragile item and one very large item, noting the difficulties you encounter with each.

## MAGAZINES

Performance Quarterly, editors Tayla Goodman and Peter Everett. 132 Lower Road, London SE16 2UG.

Plays and Players (monthly): editor, Sandra Rennie. Mineco Design Ltd, Northway House, 1379 High Road, London, N20 9LP.

The Stage (incorporating Television Today; weekly). Peter Hepple, Reviews Editor, The Stage, Stage House, 47 Bermondsey Street, London SE1 3XT.

Theatre Record: editor Ian Herbert. 4 Cross Deep Gardens, Twickenham, Middlesex, TW1 4QU.

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Classic Drama, ed. David Self. Stanley Thornes, 1998

A Director Calls: Stephen Daldry and the Theatre, by Wendy Lesser. Faber & Faber, 1997

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Make Acting Work, by Chrys Sale. Bloomsbury, 1997

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- The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism, by T.S. Eliot. Faber and Faber
- Writing a Play, by Steve Gooch. A & C Black
- Stage Management
- Stage Management, by Daniel Bond. A & C Black, 1997
- The Staging Handbook, by Francis Reid. A & C Black.

## DESIGN

- British Theatre Design: The Modern Age, ed John Goodwin. Weidenfeld & Nicolson
- Designing for the Theatre, by Francis Reid. A & C Black
- Effects for the Theatre, ed Graham Walne. A & C Black
- Make Space! Design for theatre and alternative spaces. Design Umbrella

## LIGHTING

- The Stage Lighting Handbook, by Francis Reid. A & C Black
- Stage Lighting, by Richard Pilbrow. Nick Hern

## COSTUME

- Costume: Eyewitness Guides, by L. Rowland-Warne. Dorling Kindersley, 1992
- Create Your Own Stage Costumes, by Jacquie Govier. A & C Black, 1996
- Designing and Making Stage Costumes, Motley. A & C Black
- Fashion in Costume 1200-1980, by Joan Nunn. A & C Black
- The Hat Book, by Juliet Bawden. Charles Lett, 1992
- The Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Costume and Fashion:  
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The Usborne Book of Dressing Up, ed by Cheryl Evans and Paula Borton. 1993

### MAKE-UP

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### PROPS

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Stage Crafts, by Chris Hoggett. A & C Black.

### WRITING

Writing for radio and TV

Writing for Radio, by Colin Haydn Evans. Allison & Busby

Writing for Radio, by Rosemary Horstmann. A & C Black

Writing for the BBC, Broadcasting House, Portland Place, London W1A 1AA

The Craft of Writing TV Comedy, by Lew Schwarz. Allison & Busby

Writing for Television, by Gerald Kelsey. Can be ordered via Freelance Market News

How to write for television, by William Smethurst. How To Books

### USEFUL SOURCES

The Spotlight (7 Leicester Place, London WC2H 7BP; 0171 437 7631) publishes a book, Contacts, containing all the addresses of theatre organisations

New Playwrights Trust: Interchange Studios, Dalby Street, London NW5 3NQ.

TAPS (Television Arts Performance Showcase). Set up in 1993; 80% of the writers in the scheme are now writing for TV. As well as arranging studio based rehearsed performances in front of invited industry audiences, they run a creative writing course and roadshows. Teddington Lock, Teddington, Middlesex TW11 9NT.