

# **DRAMA** *Works*

**Approaches To Unseen Text**

**EXTRACT**

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## FOREWORD

The more I have worked on this book, the more I have become convinced that this is the right approach to the whole syllabus - and the best starting-point for ANY syllabus. All syllabuses require an understanding of all aspects of theatre and of styles and that is what this book tries to do. Of course, there are many references to the AQA examination, since that was my starting-point, but the work in these pages would be an invaluable starting-point to any theatre course, because of its emphasis on both practical work and play analysis from the director's, designer's and actor's point of view.

Also, though the Unseen Text AQA test occurs as part of the A2 examination process, I would suggest that the work here is started long before - right at the beginning of a sixth form course - whether you are studying this syllabus or another. The work is useful for all and will teach any student a lot about theatre in general and about how to approach a text of any kind. The wide variety of plays covered will be an eye-opener to many students and be a useful resource for any drama department.

## GAINING EXPERIENCE: THE VARIETY OF STYLES

There is not a great deal of point in expecting students to identify all the kind of labels that critics are fond of: kitchen sink drama, anger, absurd, cruelty etc. This would be expecting too much. However, it is possible to identify broader styles of theatre and this will be very helpful. This is the starting point, then; establishing the main ingredients of a particular style. It must always be recognised, though, that there are cross-overs at all times; this is why simple labels do not work. Many plays, best approached with a naturalistic acting style will share features of other styles in their presentation. For the purpose of this examination, that is all to the good. An unseen play may contain Brechtian features and those of Stanislavski, for instance, AT THE SAME TIME. Indeed many modern plays are a rich mixture of styles and influences which should be seen as a help, not a hindrance, to the students. Providing they are trained throughout at spotting these influences and cross-referring with their own experience all the time, they will have no problem.

# Extract One

**HELMER** Very well. But now, tell me, little spendthrift, what do you want for Christmas?

**NORA** Me? Oh, pooh, I don't want anything.

**Now, consider the following question as a whole group, through discussion:**

**What features do these three extracts have in common? Consider what you notice about the stage directions - in general - and what you notice about the characterisation - in general.**

[Here is a teacher's check-list for the above:

Detailed stage directions, often with very specific moves suggested. Detailed descriptions of setting, which in all three cases suggest 'real' places, detailed furniture and props, etc.

The characters depict 'real' people in that the playwright has made every attempt to give them credibility through the language they use [appropriate to status and class, for instance] and the descriptions given of them in the stage directions.]

These two areas are the ground-base for the naturalistic style - and the style can usually easily be spotted through the detailed stage directions alone. For those who do not study Stanislavski, it is important here that they should have some idea of what naturalism as approached by this practitioner stands for.

Stanislavski believed in making every attempt to discover and illumine what the playwright was trying to do with his play. In other words, he believed in being true to the text, not in imposing a directorial idiosyncratic slant on it.

He wanted to give characters depth and psychological reality, by seeking to disclose their hidden motivations and what is going on in their head - which will then be revealed by the manner in which they act on stage and will dictate how the lines are delivered.

Every effort was made to make characters, their dress and the settings 'real' and accurate as to period detail. Naturalistic plays are supposed to be 'slices of real life'.

In each of the three extracts quoted, a Stanislavskian approach would be entirely appropriate and those who have studied Stanislavski could refer to his System in their written answers as part of the proof of their 'theatrical ideas encountered...'

Bearing this in mind, without the need to labour through the System, help the students realise the psychological implications of a character through the following:

**Look at the last few lines of the first extract from where Jenny asks 'Where's Ronnie?' Ask them to read it aloud as if:**

**Jenny dislikes Ronnie, suspecting him of mucking her sister around**

**Jenny is in awe of him and excited about the prospect of him as part of the family**

**Beatie knows the relationship is on the rocks but doesn't want to talk about it**

**Beatie trusts Ronnie absolutely and is sure he will eventually marry her**

**In extract B, look once again at the last part, after Masha exits.**

**Try Fyokla's character once she is alone with Chekhov:**

**flirtatiously, saucily - she is the sort of person who will flirt with and tease any man really not very quick in the brain area at all, as well as being very tired, so that she is struggling for answers that will not get her into trouble**

**In extract C, look at just after the opening, from where Nora tiptoes across and listens at her husband's door.**

**Choose someone to act this move out, plus the line following, as if:**

**Nora is feeling guilty and is frightened of her husband**

## **Extract Two**

Now try some very brief practical exercises to help fix some of these features in the mind.

**In pairs, one acting as Mrs Johnstone and one first as a director and then as Mrs Lyons, show how you would indicate the change of place and the start of the story at the end of the extract. Clearly, Mrs Lyons is better-off than Mrs Johnstone; how can the character show this just through the way she enters? [For those trained in Brecht, this is 'Gestus.']**

**Try also as a solo, the change from Narrator to Milkman - how can this be quickly established? Pick a line from each role to show the difference in tone of voice, accent, etc.**

There is nothing naturalistic about the extract given of 'Blood Brothers.' Arguably, though, the conversation between Carol and her Mother is, in a bleak way, naturalistic - and there are directions, such as Carol drying her clothes, ironing and dressing herself, which, though lacking detail, could be made naturalistic. **In pairs, work through the dialogue shown here, trying it in a naturalistic style. What difficulties did they encounter?** I suspect they'll find themselves brought up short against the repeated lines, which impose a kind of rhythm that intrudes on any naturalistic way of saying them. Then there is the direct address to the audience of the last line from the Mother which breaks the previous more naturalistic section. **Make sure this last part is explored as well as the rest of the scene and discuss what effect it has.**

**Finally, compare the two entrances of Basho, showing him 'walking older' the second time around. Show a part of each of the two speeches he makes on entering, too. What is the tone of both? Has Basho changed and how should this be shown in movement and voice? Work in pairs for this exercise, each taking turns at being actor and director.**

These exercises should be enough to prove how important it is to spot the clues in the unseen text, which indicate the right style for the play. For some plays, there is definitely a 'wrong' style. These three extracts would not work in a naturalistic style and a student must be able to recognise this and write appropriately as director, designer or actor. I don't believe, however, that it is too difficult to spot, providing you are alert to the clues in the way the piece is written.

Now divide the class up into small groups and allocate one of the extracts to each group. They should all do the following:

**1. Using whatever is lying around the studio, even if just chairs or blocks, come up with a setting that is suitable for your piece. If you feel that no setting is required at all, discuss in your group the atmosphere being aimed for and how that could be achieved: Lighting? Sound? Props? Effects? In some cases, such as 'Road', you might need to think of a setting and an atmosphere. In 'Narrow Road...' you might just want to consider an effect - or you might want to suggest river, village, city ... and if so - how?**

**Each group is to prepare a statement to present to the rest of the class describing the decisions they have made and justifying them by direct reference to the script.**

**2. Move the characters through the scene, deciding on entrances, exits and moves within the scene from one area to another. What difficulties did they encounter? What discoveries were made?**

**Once again, it is best if they present their findings to the rest of the group - with practical demonstration. For instance, they might need to demonstrate *how***



# **Extract Three**

Finding the features in common of these three extracts is going to be harder, but as with the work we have done so far, it ought to be attempted. **So, through group discussion, see a.) what they can come up with as identifying marks for these three very different passages and b.) what Brechtian and Stanislavskian influences they can spot, if any, and c.) Do they think that a knowledge of Stanislavskian or Brechtian techniques might help in performing any of these extracts?**

As before, below is a teacher's checklist for this exercise.

a.) Probably they will say that all three have a sense of weirdness, or something surreal about them. I hope they might say something along the lines of there being more imaginative input required from director, actor and designers. The three passages are less confined to a particular style; there is a freedom about them. They are not 'safe' texts, firmly rooted in known human experience.

b & c.) 'Dark of the Moon' is written in a strong hillbilly accent - which does confine it to a particular area in the U.S.A. - the same kind of mountainous wild terrain as the '70s film 'Deliverance' is set against. The stage directions do indicate quite a detailed background, which could be done naturalistically. [In the actual play, scenes on the mountain are sandwiched between scenes in the village so too realistic a setting would not work - but the students faced with an Unseen do not know this and can only work with what they are given.]

The sparse furnishings mentioned in the stage directions of 'A Kind of Alaska seem to show an indication of place rather than too much detail. [It is worth telling them that the style of the piece - the pauses and silences - are a trademark of Pinter's and that this style has found its way into modern theatre language. This kind of bleak style - with its many pauses and silences is 'Pinteresque.' A pause is shorter than a silence. In some plays of Pinter's even more variation of pauses are indicated: short pause = 1 beat; pause = 2 beats; long pause = 3 beats; silence = 5 beats. This is my own approximation.] Though not naturalistic, a kind of naturalism can be imposed on this style, mainly through the actors who have to make sense of what they are saying. I actually feel quite strongly that a Stanislavskian approach to sub-text and to finding a logical 'through-line' would be essential to performing this piece. It is written in this way to reflect the scattered thoughts and impressions of a woman coming out of a long coma. She flips between her child self and a gradual awareness of her situation. Memories come thick and fast and in no particular order. Pauses and silences shouldn't be empty - we should see in the faces of the characters, their eyes, their body language, what their inner thought processes are.

There are many Brechtian features in the Complicite piece: the narrative style means that characters talk to the audience; they drop character to talk about themselves in the third person; we know about the death of the characters in advance and that this is all a 'story,' something that has already happened. The language is spare at times - though more poetic than would be usual at others; there is song, change of location, and minimal setting.

Because the syllabus requires this constant cross-referring of styles and influences encountered on the course, it is important to do the above exercise - but then it is also important to remind them of the first part of the discussion: what did the three pieces have in common? - and bring them back to the imagination and freedom required in the staging and performance of them. Any knowledge they have of Brook [who put on a production of 'Dark of the Moon' in 1949 - but who might choose to do it in a very different way now], Artaud, Grotowski or Craig might prove useful. For those who know nothing of these practitioners, here are some brief handles for them to use as reference:

Craig as a designer is useful here. The kernel of Craig's work boils down to the creation of atmosphere: he designed sets, light, costume, and so on which enhanced the actors' work on stage and created a symbolic, non-realistic setting. It is the combination of these elements that is important. Craig propounds a kind of 'total' theatre, in overall charge of a director, who is responsible for everything. Out of this comes unity: the actor, lights, costume, sound and set combine and work together. For some productions he used gauzes and cloths to create a setting and for others architectural shapes that towered above the actors, dwarfing them [as he proposed for 'Hamlet', for instance, to symbolise the doom or insurmountable odds that colour the play and that are bigger than

the characters themselves.] Brooding shapes, huge moveable screens, lights directed to create pools of light and shadow, costumes that blended in colour and texture with the rest of the design, flights of steps and different levels - these are easy enough to remember, even for one who has not studied Craig.

Artaud sprang out of the Surrealist movement. He tries to evoke the atmosphere of dreams and nightmares. His theatre is also a 'total theatre' where acting, light, sound and setting combine to unsettle an audience. A director following his ideas would want to create surprising visual images on stage, to shock or amaze the audience. Artaud wanted to bombard an audience with impressions, using the whole range of what theatre can offer in terms of light, sound, and anything else that might affect the senses, thus allowing the audience no time to think rationally but aiming instead to awake a gut, emotional response.

Grotowski also aims for a shock response and to create surprising visual images for an audience. But he doesn't throw the whole technical works of the theatre to an audience, as Artaud does, His theatre is 'poor theatre' and throws the whole weight of theatrical expression onto the performer. Props are minimal and may be used to represent a number of things. Lighting is also minimal. Sets are individually designed to fit the play and to take in the audience as close observers on an event to which they are witnesses. The actor's body is supremely fit and can endure extreme demands on it.

Brook is hard to sum up, since he has changed many times over the years and has experimented with all the practitioners so far mentioned, taking something from each of them. His latter style, though, can be summed up as magical simplicity. He creates an empathy with an audience by starting shows with a ritual. Props, settings and costumes are simple and may be used, like Grotowski, as different things. He likes to tell a story in the most direct way possible and relies on the plasticity of the actors' bodies to do so, rather than on technical effects.

**Having examined the above, focus first of all on 'A Kind of Alaska' and divide the class into small groups or pairs. Each group is to be allotted a practitioner: Stanislavski, Artaud or Craig and apply this practitioner to the piece. A clue: Craig might centre on the idea of whiteness; Deborah says near the end 'This is a white tent...' The whiteness can symbolise the white-out in her mind.... etc. ; the group with Stanislavski may need to look, as I suggested above, at creating a through-line for Deborah. Have them focus on a manageable section. The group with Artaud may want to focus on a surreal atmosphere, perhaps using some of the images created by Deborah's words and thinking of ways of presenting them. There are strange flashes of possible abuse in her memories - can this be shown or suggested?**

**Now try brainstorming 'Dark of the Moon', this time using the whole group. Devise a Craigian setting - all brooding mountainous shapes, the twisted tree, pools and shadows of directional light. Having discussed it, work out all the entrances and exits that occur within it on a simulated version [without the mountain size and shapes, of course] made out of stage blocks.**

**Next try a Brookian opening. Create a ritual feeling of magic and the wild tempestuous nature that characterises all the non-human witch-kind, as performed by a number of 'witches'. This is an atmosphere-setter to open the piece. The witches melt into the landscape as John approaches.**

Finally, a look at 'The Three Lives of Lucie Cabrol'. The Brechtian elements are built in anyway, and don't need experimentation, so long as they remember that the actors are addressing their narration to

the audience directly. There are many shocking and surprising images within the extract, suitable for either Artaud [using Total Theatre] or Grotowski [using Poor Theatre.] Complicite clearly favoured the latter [the doubling of buckets as chairs, for instance], so let's look particularly at Grotowski for this extract.

**First of all, ask the group to make a list of the props, things, animals, etc. mentioned in the extract. Notice how many times a prop is used even in this short section [buckets = chairs; a bucket of potatoes is emptied to represent the birth of a child, etc.] Can Lucie's 'coffin' double with any of the other props mentioned?**

**Then ask them to work through all the stage directions in the piece, practically, coming up with sensible and imaginative solutions to everything mentioned. The killing of the pig and the ploughing with a horse should make for some interesting ideas!**

All these exercises will have stretched the student's imaginations and should enable them to look at any unseen text in a different way, with an eye to its potential for an act of creation - which is of course what any act of theatre is. They should also see how much is a matter of choice. There are many ways in which any of these plays could be performed. In my teacher's checklist above, I suggested a Stanislavskian approach to the portrayal of Deborah - but equally she could be done almost blankly, hardly moving her head, with little expression. Try this for the same section that was put under the Stanislavski treatment before and compare the two. Which do they find most effective and why? Students need to remember that choices are theirs. Providing the choices they make in responding to an unseen text are justifiable and well-justified by them and can be seen to be practicable, there is no rigidly 'right' way of doing a play.

So far, I have laboured the six practitioners as part of the experience that students can refer to as part of their response to a piece of text. But of course anything they have seen, performed in, read or studied over the two years and more of their drama 'careers' is also part of that experience to which they can refer. That includes the studies of pieces of text in this book, all of which, once the exercises are gone through, become part of the 'experience' to enrich their theatrical knowledge.