

DRAMA *Works*

Exploring Theatre

Kneehigh

EXTRACT

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INTRODUCTION

All my previous work on and with practitioners have been inspired as much by the writings of these practitioners as their work in the theatre. Much of this work was seen through the filter of other, contemporary, practitioners. In the case of this Styletaster, there are no substantial writings to feed on - a handful of programme notes, articles and hearsay. Instead, this resource comes out of my love of, and admiration for, Kneehigh in performance. The theories, instead of coming from a body of writing, have sprung from viewing their shows over very many years and in many different venues. It has helped that I live in Cornwall, so that I have an overview of their development. I hope I do justice to a fine company who will continue to develop, change and delight audiences over many more years.

Normally, the history of a company or of a practitioner has little relevance to the theories that each come to embody. But this is not so in the case of Kneehigh. The chronological history shows how the company has changed according to new demands, the adoption of new ideas from far and near, and the sharing of experience with actors trained in other disciplines. Much of the practical work for this resource will emerge from studying Kneehigh's historical development.

I have designed practical exercises throughout, many of them springing out of elements in Kneehigh's shows, or, in the final section, using parts of some of the playtexts also. In addition, there are more general exercises in three stages, which intends to build the skills of close ensemble work, a physical style that is necessary for acting in the open air, clowning and, essentially, working an audience. Each of the three stages precede the three historical development sections.

The intention throughout is firstly to give a clear idea of what Kneehigh's style is. Luckily it is very distinctive. Secondly, to offer source material for students to develop their own devised or adapted pieces, using whichever elements of that style they may find appropriate, to accord with exam requirements. The breadth and depth of this work makes this more properly part of the Practitioners Through Practice series than a Styletaster. It is much longer and fuller than any of the individual practitioner sections in the Styletaster files.

Following through the work in this resource will not make you a Kneehigh actor. Some elements of the style would be hard for a group of A level students, unless they have good musicians and singers in the group and a willingness to dance. I have given some exercises in making music and dance within the group which don't need too much proficiency, and this should prove useful for that area of the style. In any case, exam specifications only expect you to *base* your work on the style of a chosen practitioner. It should be a springboard for your own exciting material, and not slavishly followed. To that end, the whole of this resource is liberally spiced with ideas for projects which an A level group could undertake.

I'd like to finish this introduction with an anecdote that I remember as if it were yesterday. It was when *Tristan and Yseult* was performed at the National Theatre. I had travelled up from Cornwall to meet up with my daughter who lived in Kent and who adored Kneehigh. She had asked me to take an old schoolfriend of hers with us to see the show.

Now it happened that this young woman had never been to the theatre other than to

a pantomime when she was a child. She was apprehensive, she confessed, and expected a play at the National Theatre would be heavy-going. My daughter and I exchanged looks and smiles.

Every now and again, my daughter and I glanced at her friend, who as the first half progressed, was leaning further and further over the edge of the front circle where we were seated. Her elbows were resting on the circle barrier and her face was rapt. When the interval came, she turned to us with shining eyes. 'I never knew theatre was like this,' she said. What greater accolade could there be? 'Making theatre for non-theatre-goers,' indeed.

As we left the theatre at the end of that show, another member of the audience was talking about how he always came to as many shows at the National as he could. He hadn't known what to expect from this, to him, unknown company from the Styx. 'I don't feel I've watched a show,' he said. 'I feel I've been in it.'

FIRST LEVEL PREPARATION WORK

ENSEMBLE EXERCISES

Kneehigh themselves work very closely together as a company. When they are working on a play, they begin each day with running along the cliff tops adjacent to the barns where they rehearse. Built into the running are certain 'instructions' which one of the members will call out as they run.

Though this exercise is better done out of doors - and you should do this if you are able - it can be adapted for your studio or hall space. Choose as big a space as possible for it - hall over studio.

Walk first, in a close formation. Only a few inches should separate each one of you. Your formation will depend on the numbers in your group, but an example would be, if you have nine in your group, then have three lines of three in a box formation.

First practise walking at the same pace as everyone else. There is no leader for the exercise. When you have achieved this, increase the pace, once again without anyone obviously instigating the change. You are aiming for a unity within the group that includes all members, without anyone standing out or bossing the others.

Play with the walking pace by increasing or decreasing the speed, keeping to the formation and the distances apart from your neighbours. If the formation breaks, or the distances alter, then go back to a slow pace and build up gradually. Out of doors, this can all happen just following the contours of the route - a path or the outer perimeter of the playing field. Indoors, you will have to build in the turning of corners without breaking formation. This is harder.

When you are able as a group to do this, then begin to run together. It's not a sprint; just a jog, so that everyone is able to do it. When you are able to keep together without breaking formation, or increasing distance between the other lines or your neighbours, appoint a leader for the day. The leader will call out instructions, as follows, but in any order:

**forwards
backwards
touch
change
close eyes**

on the command 'touch' - everyone touches another person close to them, putting a hand on a shoulder, or on the back between the shoulder blades, for example. The rhythm and the pace of the run must not alter. Until the next instruction, you keep touching, so that all the group are physically as well as mentally linked.

On the command 'change' - everyone, without breaking the rhythm of the jog, changes places with another WITHOUT BREAKING THE FORMATION - it could be just a swap with another in your line, or with someone behind or in front. If chaos happens, keep coming back to this instruction. Once again, it's about group sensitivity.

On the command 'close eyes' the group keep doing whatever the last instructions was - forwards, backwards or whatever - with eyes closed and without breaking formation or changing pace or the spacing between each individual. This involves strong mental concentration. Don't use this command with or immediately after the 'Change' command.

EXTRACT 3:

'FIRING THE IMAGINATION' : THE BEGINNINGS: THE 1980s

As I worked through the history of Kneehigh, I began to feel that the best way of discovering Kneehigh 'theories' and then working with the ideas that become, loosely, a 'theory' in a practical fashion, was precisely through this chronological development. In this way, as Kneehigh experimented and made discoveries about themselves as a company, finding out what worked for them, so you and your students will too.

Kneehigh was founded in 1980 by Mike Shepherd, who is to this day the key figure of the company. Trained as a teacher, but with a burning desire to act, Shepherd suffered frequent rejection throughout his adolescence and early adulthood. He was banned from school plays and not allowed to try for Drama School or University. During his training as a teacher, he started directing with Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd*, but ended up being banned from the drama studio at his college.

Once he began teaching, in Cornwall, he started in his spare time to direct locals in an interesting choice of play: Max Frisch's *Fireraisers*. Soon, disillusioned and frustrated with teaching, Shepherd took his motorbike and went travelling. He met a feminist theatre company and played Punch in a production of theirs.

What does this early part of Shepherd's life, prior to the formation of Kneehigh tell us? That Shepherd is a rebel, a fighter against authority. Though rejected many times, and considered 'not good enough' when he did - after teacher training - finally apply for Drama school, he was not put off. He refused to accept rejection and found other ways of fulfilling his dream of being an actor.

One of the things that theatre critic Michael Billington said about Kneehigh actors as opposed to actors trained in the traditional drama schools is this: that they are 'the antithesis of the black box studio actor who comes fresh out of Rada.' And this is because Shepherd himself was never traditionally trained, and many of the people involved in the company, from the start, were friends and neighbours of his, people who lived in Cornwall, rather than being professional actors.

Those first two choices of Shepherd's to direct are also telling: a musical [*Sweeney Todd*] - which is far from the saccharine usual choices of an amateur director and *Fireraisers*: a German play which is both a parable and an absurdist comedy.

Music is always a feature of Kneehigh shows, so *Sweeney Todd* is a telling first

show. It has a dark storyline too, with characters that verge on the grotesque, features that emerge over and over in Kneehigh shows.

I offer the storyline of *Fireraisers* below, because within it can be found many ideas which surface in shows throughout Kneehigh's development.

The play opens with the central character, Biedermann, an Everyman figure, 'normal' and worthy, reading newspaper reports of arsonists who talk their way into people's homes, move into their attics and then burn their homes down. Biedermann declares he would never fall for such a thing. As soon as he says this, he is tested. The first arsonist appears and with a mixture of threat and persuasion, he talks his way in, and settles in the attic. Shortly after, another arsonist appears and soon Biedermann's attic is full of oil drums of petrol and somehow he finds himself helping the arsonists measure the fuse and giving them matches.

The whole thing is a parable perhaps for fascism and how easily normal German people were duped into allowing evil into their daily lives. Biedermann along with his wife - and by implication the majority of the German people - were in total denial as to what was going on but ended up becoming complicit.

The final scene shows the couple at the gates of Hell, where they find that the two arsonists were in fact the Devil and Beelzebub.

Throughout the play there is a Chorus of firemen, who comment on the action.

As we go through the history of Kneehigh and the kinds of stories that still appeal to them, you will notice that there are many ingredients of *Fireraisers* present: the dark comedy, the parable - the idea that you need to dig under the story to find what it's really about - the chorus. Then there is the foolish and innocent Everyman [or woman] figure. A recurring theme is of an innocent duped by the Devil. This is an idea that runs through the history of mankind via the folktales that are a patchwork record of that history, and the same themes recur all over the world. It is these folktales that Kneehigh have made their particular province.

Other beginnings that were developed in later productions were:

1. **A chorus**, often of actors used as the main characters in the play, but here 'disguised', behind masks or similar costuming. I have already mentioned the chorus of the Unloved in the much later *Tristan and Yseult*, but this kind of idea of a chorus who are both outside[commenting] and inside[performing] the show began with the chorus of Old Bores in *Around the World in Eighty Days*[Minutes].

2. **Audience participation**, particularly in the audience countdown of the last minutes of the '80 minutes' in *Around the World...* Audience participation is a main feature in every Kneehigh show.

3. **Physical theatre**, often of a grotesque and comical kind, such as a couple of Sumo Wrestlers, with huge padded stomachs and bottoms, in *Around the World...*

4. **Site specific work**. 1988's school touring show, *Stig* [based on Clive King's *Stig of the Dump*] involved building a dump in a corner of the school playing ground or sports field. Site specific work is a very important feature of Kneehigh's work. We will see how this developed from the end of the 1980s throughout the next decade into two main strands:

a]what Shepherd calls 'Landscape Theatre', which has now split away from Kneehigh, taking with it some of the main Kneehigh artists, to become

Wildworks, and

b] the design of the main shows to fit into specific outdoor settings, such as the Minack Theatre, Restormel Castle and the Eden Project.

5. Subjects suggested either by the unique landscape of Cornwall, or by Cornish subject matter. In the 1980s, *Sun and Shadow* [1988] was about a retired couple who have settled in the Cornish peninsular. The play deals with Cornish concerns about the effects of incomers and the tourist trade.

This decade also saw three different versions [itself indicative of how Kneehigh constantly change and adapt even existing material] of *Tregeagle*, the story of an 18th century Cornish Justice who sold his soul to the devil. This is the key play of that decade and, as such, I will deal with it in more detail later.

6. The playing of multiple roles. This has always been, and still is, a feature of Kneehigh style. Kneehigh think nothing of men playing women and vice versa. Instead of trying to make men appear more feminine, or women appear more masculine, a spirit of buffoonery or grotesqueness is a key to gender swapping the Kneehigh way. In more recent years there are the men playing the female Bacchae in the play of that name, in their long tutus and white vests as an example, or Craig Johnson dressed in a headscarf and red kneesocks as Brangian, having played the super-macho Irish warlord Morholt elsewhere in the story of *Tristan and Yseult*.

There are practical reasons for these simple costume additions: they often have to be achieved at great speed, back and forth, because of role-swapping.

EXTRACT 4:

1994/5 THE ASHMAID This time Kneehigh took the story of Cinderella and turned it on its head. This is the first time that Emma Rice acted with Kneehigh, as Cinderella [the Ashmaid]. Giles King and Mike Shepherd played the ugly sisters, Bec Applebee played the Prince and Sue Hill the wicked stepmother. Because of the similar gender-altering, and the fact that it was a Christmas show, this was undoubtedly a Kneehigh-style pantomime.

One part of this play was always improvised. This is where the two ugly sisters are waiting till they can be alone with Cinderella, because they want to beat the living daylights out of her. The 'control' to the situation, and what gave the scene its edge, was their mother. She leaves them, but may come back at any moment. The audience feed into the anticipation, the waiting until the mother has gone, and then the apprehension of her return. The first part, while she's still there, is full of laden looks and grimaces, mouthed threats behind the mother's back. The sisters use the audience to bounce off - first with their looks and threats and then with their attack on the Ashmaid.

Use this as an exercise in precision timing. Have a number of groups of four try this out with the rest of the group acting as audience. There are the two sisters - ugly, but who think themselves gorgeous [played by men in the Kneehigh version, so you could do either] - the Cinderella/Ashmaid character, and the Stepmother, who was in the original a power-freak of the worst kind! She demanded total obedience of her daughters, who had to call her 'Mummy.' They had to run round her and flatter her and chorus obediently how much they loved her and how wonderful she was. 'Yes, Mummy,' 'No, Mummy.' She kept them on their toes. It is the fearsomeness of Mummy that keeps the audience also on edge. No one, either audience or cast, would want to be caught out by the return of

Mummy.

The scene is in two parts. Cinderella has refused to help the sisters in some capacity. Perhaps they asked her to improve on their dresses [in the original these were 60s-style psychedelic floral concoctions that stopped above the knee] or to do their hair in a fancy fashion [the original sisters and Mummy wore outrageous blue wigs; Mummy's concoction was reminiscent of Medusa's snaky locks.]

Start it with the sisters asking Cinderella their favour and her refusal, but before they can bash her, Mummy enters. From then on the timing must be laden looks and threats every time Mummy looks away for a second. Remember to include the audience; they are party to your plans for Cinderella.

The grouping will be important too. Perhaps all three girls are facing Mummy, who is telling them of the coming ball, with plans for each of them, but particularly for herself. Mummy also colludes with the audience. She is a totally over-the-top and completely grotesque comic character. As her hair suggests, she is a gorgon. Her eyes could freeze waterfalls with a single glance. Her anger is to be avoided at all costs. So both audience and daughters toe the line to her face, but follow their own agenda whenever she turns away.

The scene needs to be long enough for the tension to mount in the audience, as to what will happen to Cinderella when Mummy leaves. Perhaps she is the only one who is not toeing the line with her stepmother, but is questioning her, making her angry, and so upsetting the sisters further as they fear that she will endanger their chances to go to the ball if Mummy gets too mad. Meticulously practice the timing of each threatening look or action in the brief moments when Mummy is turned away.

The second half of the scene has Mummy leaving the stage, but promising to return. The tension then is how long before she comes back. The audience are very much included in this part. The sisters use them to bounce ideas off. What punishment should they give Cinderella? They feed off the audience suggestions of more and more surreal things to do with her, and Cinderella herself also works the audience on her own behalf. Perhaps Mummy's return is at the very moment when the pair lay their hands on the Ashmaid to begin her absurd punishment.

As preparation for this second half, just decide some of the crazy suggestions you are going to make to start the ball rolling. Then when you have performed the first half of the scene in front of the rest of the group, this second half is a genuine working of your audience.

EXTRACT 5:

THE BACCHAE 2005 was an adaptation from Euripides by Carl Grose and Anna Maria Murphy - a combination that had already worked very well for *Tristan and Yseult*. This was another co-production with the West Yorkshire Playhouse, directed by Emma Rice, music by Stu Barker and in the majority of the cast many familiars: Mike Shepherd, Robert Lucskay, Charlie Barnecut, Eva Magyar, Craig Johnson, Giles King and Andy Brodie.

The story is the same as the original version:

The cult of Dionysus is gradually creeping through Greece, but there are some who resist the new religion. Dionysus himself arrives to sort the problems out and to punish all those who resist him. The action centres on the kingdom ruled by Pentheus, who clings to his older religion and will have nothing to do with the Dionysus cult. His

mother, Agave, however, along with many others - all women - convert totally to the new cult. Despite the adoration of the new god by most of the court, Pentheus throws Dionysus into prison, but he is a god and easily breaks out. He designs a fitting punishment for Pentheus. He winds the women up so that they drink and dance until they are in a frenzy. Anything that comes near while in this state they tear to pieces. Dionysus has told Pentheus that, if he wants to understand what they are about, he needs to spy on the Bacchae, as the followers of Dionysus are called, while they are celebrating their rites, which are for women only. He persuades Pentheus to dress as a woman, but the Bacchae see through the disguise - and their leader, Agave, Pentheus's mother, tears him limb from limb. Her own son's blood staining her lips, and carrying his head, Agave sobers up and realises what she has done. But when she appeals to Dionysus for help, he ignores her and abandons her.

Kneehigh felt that there was much material here that was as relevant today as it ever was. With religious troubles all over the world, where even different sects of the same religion fight, there is much in the original script that resonates. But the take was thoroughly modern all the same.

Dionysus is treated like a rock-star, often talking in rhythmic rap style, complete with hysterical fans. King Pentheus has a PA called Pamela. The costume is high heels, wrap around shades, 60s chic styles, especially for Agave who resembles Jacqui Kennedy in her style of dress. Dionysus himself wears a red tall narrow hat, somewhat resembling an elongated fez, or the head-dresses in Egyptian pictograms. The chorus of Bacchae are men dressed as women, with naked torsos and white tutus down to the ankles.

In the pre-show, the men come on nearly naked and don their tutus, exclaiming and commenting on their garb, until they are transformed into the Bacchae.

The set has ladders all over the place, which allow the god to step out of reach, which he does with a sexy grace.

There is a clever running use of a single material - newspaper - which becomes almost anything during the course of the show: the thyrsi [short staffs carried by the worshippers of Dionysus], things to sit on, a cut out regiment of soldiers, fans and even - newspapers!

Dionysus readies Pentheus for spying on the Bacchae by dressing him in clothes which the god removes from a member of the chorus - Giles King. As he is stripped down to nothing at all there is some masterful comic timing as King covers up his 'bits' just in time.

The frenzied dancing on the mountainside is wonderfully acrobatic. It gets wilder and wilder, builds and builds, as in the centre Dionysus, dressed in a strange corset-like garment, seduces Agave. That first time, the horror was broken by a flip to a scene at the palace where the poor PA, Pam, tried to describe to Pentheus what was happening, and that Agave, his own mother was covorting naked. It was this report that galvanised Pentheus into wanting to see for himself.

The second time we revisit the frenzy on the mountain-side, it starts a notch higher. Dionysus and Agave dance languorously together. The Bacchae party to a fast rhythm. A lamb wanders in, is tossed over to Agave, where she has ascended a ladder to be with Dionysus, and casually she rips it apart.

This prepares us for what will happen when Pentheus blunders in, shocked at her behaviour and the death of the lamb, and tries to remonstrate. The audience want to shout a warning, but in the event what happens happens suddenly and is shocking in the extreme. First the Bacchae taunt and torture him, stripping him naked. They call to Agave,

who climbs slowly down a ladder from up high, where she has been with Dionysus. They have been making love. She is naked to the waist and wears a red tutu. Agave rips Pentheus's head off. The blood glistens horribly in the stage lights and her face and mouth too glisten with it. She is bathed in blood up to her elbows. She lifts the head up high, shining and sticky with blood.

Gradually, Agave comes to. When she realises what she has done she howls like a dog. It is a haunting dreadful sound. When she calls on her god Dionysus for whom she has sacrificed and lost every thing, he simply repeats again and again 'It would have been better if you had never been born.' The gods are not mocked, and there is always a curse as payment if they are. Pentheus's mockery has perhaps most of all been paid by his mother. Having achieved his revenge, he has lost interest. He is a god after all. Human beings do not really interest him. They are beneath his notice. His 'otherness' is shown at times throughout, when he uses his own native language [Robert Lucskay is Hungarian] to speak. At the end, the Hungarian flows out of him, emphasising this otherness. Only that one single repeated line falls on Agave's head like a hammer blow.

As a member of the audience, though years have passed, I have never forgotten the effect of the god's blind indifference as, slowly, gracefully, he ascends upwards on his trapeze until he is out of sight, leaving the suffering woman, with her terrible guilt, below, alone. It was devastating - and cathartic.

I have described some parts of this in detail, to show that Kneehigh can balance their buffoonery with hard-hitting thought-provoking moments of a different kind of wonder.

Remember, too, that playfulness can happen with props - as with the newspaper running joke [especially when unfurling the string of paper-cut out soldiers] as it can with their approach to costume, which is always surprising and unexpected.