

# **DRAMA** *Works*

**Genre, Style, Context**

**EXTRACT**

[www.dramaworks.co.uk](http://www.dramaworks.co.uk)

## GENRE, STYLE, CONTEXT

### SAMPLE PAGES: EXCERPT ONE

THE RECOGNITION AND PRACTICE OF THEATRE GENRE, STYLE AND CONTEXT,  
showing how Style and Context can affect Genre in performance.

#### AIMS and OBJECTIVES

This series of lessons aims to enable students to:

Understand how extracts of text can be rehearsed and interpreted in performance

Develop an awareness of performance style, genre and context

Explore how characters can be developed in performance

Explore how creative and artistic choices influence the way meaning is  
communicated to an audience

Explore how set design, lighting, props, costume can be used in performance

Understand how dramatic techniques can support interpretation of text for performance.

#### INTRODUCTION AND EXPLANATION OF TERMS

In a nutshell, the aim of this series of lessons is to help examination students understand the differences between these three terms - GENRE, STYLE AND CONTEXT - where they overlap and how they can affect each other.

Students need to be aware of the enormous variety of different **styles** and **genres** of theatre that are current at present.

The lessons explore **style**, **genre** and **context** and give pointers to the features that make up different **genres**. These pointers are then experienced practically, out of a belief that practice makes things more memorable for students than simply having things pointed out verbally. To experience a **genre** through practice by employing appropriate performance **styles** is to understand both **genre** and **style**.

Since there are overlaps in these three words - **genre**, **style**, **context** - it would be beneficial to have a quick exposition of their meaning.

**GENRE:** This is the broad label or category by which different types of theatre are known. Examples might be Naturalism, Epic Theatre, Musical Theatre, Comedy, Tragedy, Melodrama, Farce, Physical Theatre, Verbatim Theatre etc.

One could break the above up further by talking of Greek Tragedy, or Restoration

Comedy, and so on, because **genres** like Tragedy and Comedy will often change according to the beliefs and conditions of the period in which they are written. This is where **genre** and **context** can overlap, since the **context** of social conditions or religious beliefs may alter how comedy or tragedy, for example, is written and presented.

Likewise, of the broad labels given above, some involve a particular **style** associated with that **genre**, which is where **genre** and **style** overlap. In the case of Physical Theatre in particular, a number of different physical **styles** might be associated with that **genre**, since the many Physical Theatre companies around all have a different take on performance **style**. Some, like Kneehigh, are very broad and flamboyant, as befitting a company who largely write for outdoor venues. Others, like Frantic Assembly, use movement to explore the subtext of a generally Naturalistic piece. Others still, like Gecko Theatre, come closer to dance. Each use very different **styles**.

**STYLE:** This can cover both acting and design choices. **Style** can be used to match a particular **genre**. For instance, you might choose to perform a Naturalistic play like Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, which is a play of complex characters using conversations and situations that approximate to real life [or at least the real life of the late nineteenth century - **context** again] in a way that seeks to expose sub-text and bring out the fully-fleshed believability of the characters. If you choose to perform it naturalistically then you are being true to the spirit of the original and showing the play illuminated by a carefully researched **context** of the times. This will include period furnishings, props, costume and so on. Care will be taken in this case to make sure that lighting looks as though it is really coming in from windows or doors in the setting, for instance. The acting **style** and the design **style** will match the period of the piece and so be **contextually** in keeping with the play's **genre**.

Or, as in a recent National Theatre performance of the play, a contrasting **style** may be chosen to illumine something about Hedda's character. In this production a blank white set scattered with a few dead leaves symbolised the inside of Hedda's mind. She was trapped, bored, with nothing to entertain her except to play mind-games with the other characters. The costume was modern, the lighting white and pitiless. This is an example of how design **style** can be used to lead the audience to a different understanding of a period play.

Changing the **style** of a written piece, being playful with it, will often illumine different features of even the oldest of texts. Design choices are the most visually immediate ways of altering the **style** that might normally be associated with a particular **genre**, but it is fun to see how changing acting **style** can also affect our understanding of a play.

**CONTEXT:** This covers both the social and political times in which the play was written and the choices a director might make in order to make it as pertinent to our own times as

possible.

A production of *Hamlet* a few years ago placed the play in an Eastern bloc state where Hamlet is being watched and spied on by Claudius's personal bodyguard, armed with mobile phones and reporting back on Hamlet's behaviour. This altered our whole perception of the character of Hamlet, making sense of his pretence at madness to throw the watchers off the scent and showing indeed that something was 'rotten' in the corrupt state of Denmark. *Julius Caesar* set in a troubled African country with an all black cast was another example of how changing the **context** of a play can bring new life and meaning to it for a modern audience.

## EXTRACT TWO

Naturalism aims to give an illusion of real life. Having read the extract with your group, discuss what about this extract shows you that this is a play in the Naturalistic **genre**. Consider the stage directions first and then the dialogue.

Working together as a whole group, plan out the setting for a Naturalistic production of this scene. Use items around your studio to map it out - e.g. chairs with backs towards the playing area to mark out doorways, two backs of chairs together for the sink with window, the sofa made with two chairs together, and so on.

Make a list of all furnishings and props needed.

Think of colours, wear and tear etc. to give an impression of the place. What other details might be added to contribute to the impression you would want to make of this house?

Notice that already you are beginning to make choices. Even with the brief that you are keeping the play strictly Naturalistic, there are artistic decisions that can influence an audience. For instance, if you choose to emphasise the poverty and dinginess of this home, you are making a social comment about the people and the conditions in which the working-class of that period have to live.

This also brings in the importance of **context**. In the 1960s there were still plenty of homes without the mod cons of electricity, gas or even such things as a bathroom. The fact that Wesker begins his stage directions with this might show that he wants a social comment to be made to the audience for which he was writing.

How could lighting and sound influence the atmosphere you are wanting to create? For instance, would you want to emphasise hardship by keeping the lighting quite dim, or would you want to emphasise how Jenny is making the best of things and show sunshine pouring in through the window?

It is sometimes hard to realise that, with even the fullest descriptions of set or character imposed by the playwright, the director and designer still has the right to use the text for his or her own purposes - to emphasise a particular stand-point or message - even while remaining faithful to the script. This is a very important point for students to understand.

### EXTRACT THREE:

How else would narrating the stage directions - or at least some of them - change the play? It would certainly make people notice things more. Narrating certain key moments would alter the audience perception of those moments.

Try out all of the above suggestions and discuss fully how this alters the perception of the play. The illusion of 'reality' is broken and we are reminded, as Brecht wants, that the actors are just that, not real people, and the setting is nothing more.

Most of the way people initially react to a play they are watching is influenced by the production design. In Lesson One you looked at how you can focus an audience to certain aspects of the set by lighting, clutter, exaggeration of the run-down furniture and so on - without altering the Naturalistic feel. But what if your set was as minimal as the one you have just set up in the studio and you weren't delivering the stage directions? Decide as a group what is the minimal amount needed to present the scene - include props in this. What, in this minimal version, could you have the audience imagining? [Doors, windows, walls etc. perhaps?] Do you think that, so long as the style of acting remained realistic, the play could be just as convincing?

There are many ways of delivering different messages through design. Consider the following ideas and discuss their practicality and what different signals are being sent to an audience:

having a small central area marked out with clutter and some furniture, through which Jenny and Jimmy have to pick their way. Round the outside is bright light, space, birdsong perhaps. The message would be that Jenny and Jimmy's lives are small and insular. They are trapped in their little box, whereas Beatie has had the courage to leave and go out into the wide world.

beginning with Beatie and her suitcase walking through streets full of the sound of traffic and bright flashing lights. She could walk on the spot, with images flashing past her,

the hubbub of the city. Actors begin to come on carrying bits of furniture etc and build the set for the opening of the play as the lights begin to change. Beatie hurries off with her case into an opening below a train station sign. Bird song and a softer light begin to take over the stage as the furnishings and clutter are built up, using the whole cast to do so.

In the above ideas, the **context** has been altered for the play. Can you think of other ways of altering the **context**? What about alterations to period? Is this a play that could work in a modern setting? By updating, you might keep it in the Naturalistic **genre**, and keep the **style** also Naturalistic, but make the **context** completely up to the minute.

What alterations would a modern context suggest as to the performance **style**? Think of the kind of cheap plastic/ faux leather furniture Jenny and Jimmy might have. How do people sit/ slouch on these? What other furniture might this room contain? How would you make it look relevant to the present day? A big TV screen? Mobile phones - might Jenny be texting and humming? Might Beatie arrive wearing trainers, with a modern looking rucksack on her back, not a suitcase? - and so on. Clothes, shoes, the presence of a TV with picture on but sound off, mobile phones - all will make a difference to the way the play is acted.

Of course, without knowing the whole play you cannot tell whether the alterations you are suggesting would work throughout, but you can see how different the play might look and therefore how differently it might be viewed by an audience.

The **context** of design will have the greatest impact on the audience. How could the delivery of the lines be made more up-to-the-minute?

Try out the following practically, and discuss whether it gives the play a more modern feel. Give each group a slightly different set of lines to play with.