

PERFORMING TEXT

SAMPLE PAGES EXTRACT ONE:

So you have been given a part in a play and told to go away and read it. How do you set about this seemingly easy task? What is needed is a special kind of reading skill.

How do we read normally? It is dependent of course on how much we enjoy the subject matter of the book. A novel may draw us in and totally engross us - we read it on the whole uncritically - we want to lose ourselves, take a rest from the world. We read poetry in a different way. We linger on the words and syllables; we enjoy the sounds and allow ourselves to be surprised by unusual or unexpected connections of ideas. Academic and factual books require a more engaged type of reading. We read them more slowly and seek to understand concepts and arguments that may be unfamiliar to us.

So how should we read a play - especially one in which we are to take on a role? First of all with the kind of attention you'd give to a factual book and, on subsequent readings, this should be followed by the kind of pleasure in the storyline you'd accord to a novel and the delight in the language that you would give to a poem.

The following group of lessons will help you approach a role you have been given from a first reading to performance. It is approached in as practical a way as possible, given that I cannot know what role you have been given and in what play. What follows should be applied to the role you are undertaking in whatever play you and your group are putting on.

PLEASE NOTE THAT THE FOLLOWING AIMS AND OBJECTIVES PERTAIN TO THE LESSONS TO FOLLOW AND NOT TO ANY PARTICULAR EXAMINATION BOARD'S SYLLABUS. THESE LESSON PLANS CAN BE FOLLOWED WHETHER YOU ARE STUDYING FOR A ROLE IN AN EXAMINATION, OR FOR ANY OTHER PURPOSE, AT ANY LEVEL FROM GCSE TO UNIVERSITY. MOST ACTORS, EVEN PROFESSIONAL ONES, WILL BE FOLLOWING A SCHEDULE SIMILAR TO THE ONE WORKED THROUGH BELOW, AS THEY WORK TOWARDS THE PERFORMANCE OF A TEXT.

AIMS & OBJECTIVES

each Section follows one of this list of aims, in the order given below.

HOW TO READ THE TEXT

HOW TO DEVELOP UNDERSTANDING OF CHARACTER

PHYSICALITY

ACTIONING PART ONE: UNITS/EVENTS, OBJECTIVES AND
SUPER-OBJECTIVES

ACTIONING PART TWO: TURNING OBJECTIVES INTO ACTIVE VERBS

CONCLUSION: FOLLOWING THROUGH TO PERFORMANCE

SAMPLE PAGES EXTRACT 2

.... The next part of this first section on READING A TEXT should take between one and a half to two hours, dependent on the size of the play and cast, and a whole day if you are including in this a further cast reading of the play, which would of course be ideal. In this further reading, although you may already have ideas about your character, just keep to a fluent and intelligent reading without trying out ideas as to voice or physicality which will slow things up at this stage.

The group reading should include the director and the designers.

When you have done the preparation and, ideally, had a further group reading of the whole text, listen first of all to any ideas the director has about the play and his/her particular take on it. In a school, college or university environment, this session should involve the pooling and discussion of ideas you already have about the play's meaning. NEVER FORGET THAT PUTTING ON A PLAY FROM A TEXT IS A GROUP ACTIVITY. Even if the pooling of ideas has thrown up many themes, and messages, decide as a group which is the most important, which is the one you as a group are going to seek to bring out in your production. This shouldn't be too difficult in most modern plays. A classic play can often offer many potential themes. To present them all in a production will muddy the clarity of the final piece. Decide on the main motivation of your text. That will give something for the designers to work on, as well as the cast.

In the professional theatre it may well be the director who has already decided what theme or themes he or she is going to bring out. The design team will have already started to work on their ideas and will bring their designs to the first reading of the play text with the cast. This is so that each actor can build into both their private and group studies an understanding of what the play is trying to achieve and the type of staging and costuming each actor will have to contend with. Every professional actor will already have done the kind of work you will follow below with your group, so as to make their first reading as an entire cast and team as useful as possible.

Having decided as a group what the main message or theme is, then ask yourself: what does your character contribute to the story and what does he or she contribute to the message or main theme? This is easy if you are playing the lead character. But every role will have a necessary part. It may be to steer the plot in a particular direction, or to act as a foil for the lead, or to show up a particular character attribute of the main character.

It is essential to get a feeling for these things before developing your own role and making your character come alive.

For instance, let's say you were given the role of Mercutio to play in *Romeo and Juliet*. Your plot outline would describe the hatred between the Capulets and Montagues and how Romeo, Juliet and their families and friends are all caught up in the destructive force that hatred engenders. Their love has the potential to heal the enmity between the families, but instead, because of the obstinacy of the older generation in particular, it ends in needless waste and tragedy.

The main theme revealed, the message which illumines the whole story, despite other lesser themes and messages, is the obstinate stupidity of the leaders of both families, who refuse the example set by the young protagonists. That example could have led to an enduring peace, through the grace of love.

So, if you were playing Mercutio, before going into the nitty-gritty of the details of the character, you would seek to understand how Mercutio contributes a] to the storyline and b] to the delivery of the main theme.

The answer to a] is that as Romeo's friend, by fighting with Tybalt and getting himself killed while Romeo, newly married in secret to Juliet, tries to separate the two, he sets in train the whole tragic unravelling. Mad with grief that his friend has been killed, Romeo pursues Tybalt and kills him in revenge. Almost at once, he realises how he's fallen into the spiral of hate and revenge between the two families and he has to flee the ruling Prince's justice - a flight that will cause a muddle of misunderstandings and at last the death of the two young lovers. Mercutio's role is thus essential to topple the storyline away from peace and love back to hatred and tragedy. b]The obstinate stupidity of this hatred and its waste, as the main theme, also has Mercutio at the heart of it. In fact, he is one of

the main stirrers-up of trouble between the families. He never questions the rightness of the hatred between the Capulets and his own family, the Montagues, so he is essential in showing how set in their habits the two families are.

And, of course, on top of an awareness of what Mercutio is there FOR, you want to make him a lively, believable character in his own right.

As your first exercise, then, use whatever text you are using and, with your group, put on an improvised performance of the main plot line. Keep it as short as your brief paragraph description. Leave out anything except the essential bare bones of the story. It might be useful to have someone narrating, while the others go through the motions of the events that occur in the script. Use one of the clear plot descriptions done by a member of the group. The narrator should watch as he/she reads and adjust his/her pace, to give the actors a chance to keep up.

Discuss the results afterwards [there will be nothing polished or perfect about it - it's just an improvisation.] Did it give you an idea of what is important in the script? Does any kind of message start to emerge? Probably not, so next try a different, narrated version, in which the concentration is on bringing out the message or the theme. This will require telling the story in a slightly more pointed way. At this stage, a Brechtian method is best. Use narration and freeze-frame moments which show the message coming through.

For instance, in your *Romeo and Juliet* example, you may have decided as a group that the essential message of the play is the stupid obstinacy of the two families, who are so entrenched in the habit of their hatred that they are blind both to the destruction and waste of young life they are causing, and to the healing and forgiveness of the past offered by the binding together of the youngest members of their separate houses. The storyline would then be objectified, taking care to show, through narration and freeze-framed tableau, the particular plot-moments which show the message clearly. Especially important would be pivotal moments when the pattern of hatred could be cast aside, but then is not [for instance when Romeo tries to prevent the fight between Mercutio and Tybalt]. Showing these pivotal moments, by the way, is very Brechtian. He calls these 'not-but' moments, because the plot could go one way and does NOT - BUT instead goes in another direction....

.... **LEVELS OF ACTION** Start with a warm-up where the whole group or cast of characters move around the room together, in any direction they like but making sure to avoid bumping into anyone else. If you have to pause or veer away from someone who looks as though they may collide with you, say 'Excuse me,' or 'I'm so sorry' before moving on. You could add a smile or a little inclination of the head, as appropriate. Move first of all at a normal speed. We'll call this normal walking pace Level 3.

Slower than Level 3 are Levels 1 and 2. Then there are faster speeds, up to Level 10, the fastest of all.

The teacher or group leader calls out numbers from now on and you respond by increasing or decreasing your pace. Include the apology for a near-collision, which must also be more leisurely or more speedy. At Level 10 this may be flung over your shoulder as you rush off. At Level 1 it may be a drawl as you edge your way around the room.

Divide the class in half so that everyone can observe the physical affect of different Levels of Action.

Follow up by trying the same thing with small groups. Divide up into groups of three, four or five. Choose an activity which will engage every member of the group in some way.

Below is a list of mimed possibilities:

building a camp-fire from scattered branches and other pieces of wood

laying a table for a dinner-party

decorating a tree

packing a large box with fragile possessions for a house-move

Each of these activities require a central focal point to which the members of the group need to bring things. Establish an object in the studio as your focal point [it doesn't matter if a chair, for instance, bears no resemblance to a tree]. The objects you bring to your central point are imaginary - mimed. A piece of cloth could stand for the focal camp-fire or the box, a chair or stepladder [ideally] for the tree, a couple of smaller tables pushed together for the dining-table.

Next start the activity at a reasonable level - 3 or 4 - then, as the leader calls out numbers between 1 and 10, react accordingly. Speech should be included as appropriate.

Once again, have the groups watch each other for a short while.

Finally, have each member of each group decide on their own action level to use within the same activity. See what difference it makes to have different levels of action within one group activity. Beware of infection! It is easy to be infected by someone else's pace - hold to your own. The group activity will not last long before a character within it needs to alter their pace. [Perhaps someone is chivvying him for being too slow, or yelling at him because he's being too fast and careless]. When this happens, stop the action altogether.

Discuss the findings of this activity. Consider the implications for group work. How effective might this exercise be if you are considering a Physical Theatre approach to a text? What about the style of text you are using? On the whole, characters working at different speeds can give a better illusion of real life, especially in crowd scenes. For more physical theatre approaches, requiring close group work, it may be important to have characters working in unison, at the same speed, for a particular effect. Then if one character starts to move at a different pace within that close-knit group, it can be eye-catching, even shocking.

At home, when you are working on your character alone, go through the scenes in the text s/he is in and decide what would be an appropriate speed for the scene. Ask yourself, would the speed change at any time in the scene? Why? Consider what your character might be thinking. It is entirely possible that there is an internal pace [fear, anxiety, excitement for instance] which is being concealed so that the outer pace of the body does not match what is going on in the character's head.

Try to make a decision about the pace of the character in general - what is his/her natural level - is s/he a stressy anxious person - 5 or 6 - or laid-back - 2 or 3, for instance?...

SAMPLE PAGES EXTRACT 4

.... In a pantomime, to give another example, the Super-Objective may be the marriage of the hero and heroine against all odds. Villains and [usually] the Dame work against this happy outcome. The characters that work against the chosen theme serve to underline it further and to strengthen it, so that the happy outcome, the Super-Objective, becomes even more joyous than if all had been plain-sailing.

Finally, as a whole cast, apply the following to the play you are undertaking as a group. Earlier, you decided on the main theme or message you want to put over to an audience. There should already have been some discussion on how each character helps or enhances by hindering that main theme. Can you identify now where the Super-Objective of that theme is? This must be the most important moment of the play - it could be just a single line or an action, or could be more. It will almost certainly be near the end of your play.

Make those decisions and make sure that every member of the cast and the design team are aware of that Super-Objective and the most important 'Through-line', message or theme of the play [which may, in a pantomime, be as simple as following the difficulties and problems that prevent the lovers getting together, which [the Super-Objective] they do

at the end.] The design team may decide to help enhance the main theme and the Super-Objective through their set design, or colour scheme, or their costumes. For instance, in Berkoff's *The Trial*, based closely on Kafka's story of the same title, you may as a group have decided that the main theme is the ridiculous and frightening convolutions of a bureaucracy gone mad. The set could be full of twists and turns and crazy angles and dead ends; the costumes could have the same oddities and angles, all enhanced by frightening sounds and lighting. Design should be a powerful way of enhancing the main theme and the Super-Objective.

Then tackle the first scene of the play. Can you divide it up into Events or Units and give each Event/Unit an Objective?

Further work on this can be done by each individual in preparation for the next group rehearsal. Look at your own characters' Objectives and have the basis of an idea of what you feel the others in your scenes might have as their Objectives. Are you the 'driver' or instigator of an Event, or do you mainly react? Does this change at any time? This would definitely start a new Event/Unit.

This work is the basis for the next stage - that of finding Active Verbs - what Stafford-Clark calls Actioning. Actioning is the process of physicalising Objectives - turning the Want of an Objective into Action....

