

DRAMA *Works*

Reviewing Plays

EXTRACT

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REVIEWING PLAYS

SAMPLE PAGES

EXTRACT ONE:

HOW TO WRITE A PLAY REVIEW FOR EXAMINATION

Every exam board has a component that requires students to review a piece of live theatre. Amateur productions are allowed, but not productions performed by the students themselves. Filmed productions, so long as they are filmed theatre productions in their original performance setting are also allowed, though some boards specify that the production must have been filmed less than three years ago. Check with your examining board before embarking on the evaluation of a filmed play.

Even if you use streamed or recorded plays as a useful tool, do make every attempt to have your students experience at least one play live. The atmosphere of being in a theatre is not comparable to any streamed or recorded play.

Below are the aims and objectives for this series of lesson plans.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

TO:

analyse and evaluate the work of others in the following areas:

- use of performance space and spatial relationships on stage
- relations between performers and audience
- design of set, costume, makeup, lighting, sound and props
- performer's vocal and physical interpretation of character

understand how:

- creative and artistic choices influence how meaning is communicated to an audience
- performance texts are informed by their social, cultural and historical contexts, and are interpreted and performed for an audience

**+ to understand and develop the language skills of review writing
to understand and develop the skills of writing a review for examination**

Throughout these lessons the students will need a designated notebook to collect their written impressions, build up their vocabulary and useful phrases, and make quick sketches of such as costume and, especially, set. For this reason, it would be best to have a notebook with both lined and unlined pages. Please note, though, that examinations will allow students to take in notes, but not finished pieces of work - so when the following lesson plans suggest a developed writing-up of any aspect of a play or performance, that will need to be done elsewhere than in the body of the notebook.

The first four lessons aim to help students acquire the tools of review-writing by using the practical work of their own group as spring-boards. Each lesson looks at an area which needs to be referred to when writing an examination review.

LESSON ONE

USE OF PERFORMANCE SPACE AND SPATIAL RELATIONSHIPS

AIMS & OBJECTIVES: To explore the use of space and spatial relationships on stage and to analyse and evaluate how this impacts on an audience.

This lesson requires two hours.

Students need notebooks and writing materials. Each should have a notebook designated for review writing and for building up these language skills.

Please note that this lesson requires a number of students, at least ten and ideally more. If you have a small number in your class, consider combining an A level group with, say, a GCSE drama group. Both these levels need the same skills for examination purposes.

Start with a warm-up exercise that in itself uses spatial relationships as an integral part of it. [Note that if you have a small group, it's a good idea to reduce the available space in your studio, by using chairs at four corners, past which it is forbidden to go.]

All the students move around the space at speed. They must not make contact with any other person in the room, not even eye contact. They are like commuters hurrying along busy pavements to work. Establish a strong beat for this, by clapping, drumming or tapping, and every now and again vary the beat - slower - faster. Any touch or knock results in a pause [still no eye contact] for those involved, for 2 beats before they move on.

After a couple of minutes of the above, instruct that everyone has become a positive magnet. Therefore, any touch results in being stuck together by whichever parts of the body made contact. Nevertheless, stuck together in increasingly larger groupings, they continue to move around to the established beat. The movement will now become more and more unwieldy as the clumps of people [some in awkward positions] try to move on.

After a time, instruct that they are all now negative magnets, which repel other objects. So everyone is released. Move around a little longer at a much slower beat, aware that coming closer to another person is now an impossibility - they will repel each other and be driven away.

Then repeat, with half the group only. The other half are spectators. This time the magnetic attraction happens through eye contact. As the individuals move round the room, if they catch the eye of another - that is the magnet that draws them in. When they are touching physically, they stop moving and hold eye contact.

Invite comments from the spectators. What do they see? Can they feel the electricity of eye contact - the concentration? Do the frozen pairs remind them of any real life relationship? Are the pairs watchable, and why? Is there a point where the 'freeze' becomes less interesting, and why? [It may be because the concentrated focus of one or the other has disappeared.]

Now try the other half of the group - but for variety's sake, after the couples are locked on with eye contact, they touch and are then 'driven away' - or repelled.

Have the new spectators analyse the facial expressions of those repelled. Again, what do they see? What can be read into such movements, of ordinary human relationships?

Next, divide the class into pairs, A and B. Have them face each other and start with a simple mirroring exercise, where first A and then B is the instigator of the movement. Instruct that all movements should be slow. The point of the exercise is to work together in a unit, not to try to trick your partner into falling behind. A spectator should not be able to tell who is leading the movements.

Now have the pairs move off into a walk. They choose their own pace - so each pair will be different. No one is the leader now. Each one tries to match the other, exactly and fluidly. When this has been established, the pairs can vary their pace and build in pauses where both come to a stop for a beat or two before moving off. But keep to walking. Anything faster will break the mirror illusion.

When you are sure that the pairs are moving beautifully together, instruct them to separate BUT to still be aware of each other. They are still moving at the same pace and stopping at the same time. The split pairs need to be aware of each other, wherever they are in the room, at all times. A spectator should be able to see who is partnered with whom by the invisible line of focus between each pair.

Keep half of the group moving and extract the rest to be spectators. Then swap, but allow time for the focus between the second pairs to reestablish itself.

With the whole group, talk about what they saw. How did they know who was partnered with whom? Can they describe the body language of what they observed?

For the next exercise have half the group as performers and the other half as audience. Swap around once you have looked at, and discussed, two of the following to allow the other half of the group to experience being the audience. As performers, you may need a minute [no more] to make certain decisions as to roles within these short group scenarios:

Form a funeral procession and then gather around the 'grave'. Can the spectators identify who are the 'chief' mourners? How?

An imaginary someone is standing on the rooftop of building. Passers-by notice him and form a crowd. Can you tell who are truly concerned and who treat it as some kind of macabre 'show'? What tells you? [body language, facial expression, voice tones.]

An imaginary fight is taking place where the spectators are seated. The group are egging them on, or showing distress, anger, or whatever is appropriate for the speedy characters being adopted.

A drunk collapses in the street. It is rush-hour and people are hurrying for buses, trains, etc. How do people react? Again, see what clues of face, gesture and voice are used.

EXTRACT TWO

Divide the group into half, to be performers and spectators. After a couple of the following exercises, swap over.

Solo: make an entrance as a troubled person. You are churning a problem over in your mind as you come in. You notice you are alone and start to speak about the problem, arguing the pros and cons with yourself.

Solo: as above, but this time the audience are there to confide in. Treat them as friends.

A group of would-be robbers, sneaking into a house through an open window, immediately clock the audience and react. Are the audience treated as if they are unexpected residents of the house, or as accessories to the robbery?

Now swap actors and audience members.

Solo: a flamboyantly outrageous character makes his/her way through the audience, flirting and communicating with them on his/her way to the stage/ performance space.

Solo: a character being pursued by bullies or 'baddies' appears at a run and, ignoring the audience, looks for a place to hide.

A group of people at a party are having a jolly time, until someone misbehaves. One member of the group relates information to the audience.

Hold whole group discussions of the effectiveness of these different methods, and talk about the use of the space. What works and what doesn't? Did the people relating directly

to the audience take up effective positions on stage to do so?

EXTRACT THREE

The first thing to realise is that the kind of review you will be writing for your examination is very different from the kind of review you will read in a newspaper or online arts programme. Though professional reviewers may pick out details, on the whole the review will be broader and more sweeping than an examiner will want to read. Nor will they want to give away too much - just enough to lure you to see it, or in some cases not to see it.

For an exam you need to develop the skills of bringing out details in such a way that the examiner, who you must assume will NOT have seen the same production, can visualise it as clearly as possible. You must make the production live and move in your own mind's eye, so that you can bring out the detail to make moments of theatre become visible for your examiner.

On the next few pages are reviews of plays currently on [as I write in 2018] in London and elsewhere. One or two of the reviews are from earlier productions, but these are few and are only of plays or practitioners that are on one or more of the syllabuses. Alternatively, you can make up your own Review of Reviews from current plays in your own area. All the newspapers have reviews you can view on line, though some need payment to access them.

I think it is helpful if the students use reviews for plays they have NOT seen for this exercise. That way they can see whether the review is informative enough, gives enough of the story or subject-matter and the characterisation and setting to intrigue.

There are sixteen plays featured here, each one with two reviews. Divide the class up into small groups of three or four and give them copies of both reviews for one of the plays with which to start work.

Here is a list of the questions they should ask themselves about these reviews:

First of all, read through both reviews.

Is there enough of the story or situation to make you clear what the production is about?
How much of each review has covered this area?

On the review sheet, put a 'D' beside all references to the design elements: lighting, sound, costume, set etc.

Put a 'C' beside all references to character. Underline the words used to describe a particular character's performance.

How much of the review is background to the play? That is, putting it in its social or historical context, information about the history of the play, its relevance to today, and so on.

Some of the reviews pinpoint particular moments that are, for whatever reason, memorable for the reviewer. What 'moments' have been picked out and did they bring this moment to life for you, who have not seen the play?

Feedback your group findings and listen to those of other groups.