

DRAMA *Works*

Year 8 Drama Plans

EXTRACT

INTRODUCTION

Much of the below is also part of the introduction to **Year 7 Drama Plans**. I have reproduced it because some people may not have the first book.

I am aware that many people teaching class drama at this level are not specialists; I have therefore taken care to explain everything - games, exercises, terminology - at the risk of irritating those specialists who are also delivering these lessons. I felt it was better to over-explain and to make clear the justification for each exercise than to leave anyone bewildered. For instance, there are sometimes games used at the beginning of lessons - though far less often than in Year 7 - as I find that starting with a whole group activity is a way of drawing the group together and beginning in a disciplined way. Games, where used, are therefore a useful part of the structure of the whole lesson, quite apart from the individual skills - concentration, alertness, speed of response, group co-operation, etc. - also addressed by participation in them.

For the non-specialist it is important to recognise that drama teachers are rather unusual people who must be prepared to join in as well as to demonstrate and who therefore need to dress appropriately, as must the children. School skirts, high-heeled shoes or hard, heavy footwear restrict movement and inhibit creativity. Just as for P.E., the student attending a drama lesson needs to feel that he is attending something with special requirements, out of the conventional restrictions of the classroom. I suggest that you make a firm ruling from the beginning that they wear trousers or tracksuit bottoms and soft shoes, plimsolls or bare feet. If you, as the teacher, need to deliver other more formal lessons, make sure that you, like them, have some tracksuit trousers to change into and are prepared to take off your own shoes.

Students new to the idea of drama are going to absorb a great deal from your manner at the beginning. That is why clothing is so important, as is a relaxed but disciplined atmosphere. They must know that no nonsense is tolerated at the same time as feeling that they can trust you and everyone in the group. If this sounds a frightening balance to the non-drama specialist, a lot will be solved by making sure there is plenty to do: the exercises must not flag but must move quickly on from one to the other. The lessons in this book will help you here.

In addition, here are a few more ideas as to how to structure your drama lesson. They will very quickly become used to your way of working and will treat the structure with as much respect as a formal lesson sat behind desks.

1. After changing, they move automatically into a seated circle in the centre of the room. It is better if this circle is seated on the floor, not chairs. Some games specify chairs but on the whole if I have said 'seated' I mean on the floor.

2. As soon as you join them in the circle they fall silent. That is the signal that the lesson is about to begin.

3. When you indicate that an exercise has finished, they sit where they are on the floor, fall silent and listen to the instructions for the next exercise. They should never move - e.g. to get into pairs - until you have indicated that all instructions have been given.

4. Lose no opportunity to promote the idea of tolerance and of working together to build a mutually supportive group.

5. Most of the last exercises of the lesson are 'performance' ones where the groups present their work to the rest of the class. Establish from the start where performances happen, i.e. on the stage or on the floor, and where the group should sit in relation to them. Some of the exercises in this book require a stage or at least a performance area which is clearly defined, others merely indicate the audience should sit in a horseshoe shape leaving the open end for performance; both audience requirements should be shown them and the signal for audience positions should be identified as also a signal for silence and concentrated attention.

6. Retain this shape for the ending session, where you, the teacher, can move into the open end of the horseshoe or onto the performance area to lead the discussion, as indicated at the end of every lesson plan.

This evaluative discussion is one of the most important areas of these lessons and was begun at the beginning of Year 7. It should by now be a habit, which spills into their written work, whether you require them to write a brief evaluative diary of their drama lessons or just a paragraph or two. Encourage them to spend no more than a sentence or two on description of the exercise and to concentrate rather on what they felt about it, how successful or unsuccessful it was and why. Good practice for later work at G.C.S.E. would be to encourage them to try and describe performances observed- albeit just their friends in the class - identifying what body language, facial expressions and voice tones conveyed moods successfully. This is not an easy task; finding descriptive visual adjectives and adverbs worries many an 'A' level student, so it would be very beneficial if they could start to 'get the habit' as early as this.

Extract One

LESSON THREE

This is a one-off lesson dealing specifically with the learning of stage positions. It is a help if it takes place on the school stage rather than in a studio, for obvious reasons, but if that is impossible for some reason, or you don't have a stage in the school, then define a part of the room you use and make it clear that this will be the stage area for this lesson. One end of the room would be best, so that a wall marks the back of the playing-area.

1. Start with a game similar to 'Lifeboat' [used in the Year 7 book]. Here, instead of the parts of a ship - as in 'Lifeboat' - which the students must run to, they are given the parts of the stage.

First of all, talk them through the stage areas:

- a. **The back of the stage is called Upstage. The front is Downstage.**
- b. **Left and right is taken according to the actor, not the audience, so Upstage Left is the top right hand corner from the audience point of view.**
- c. **Talk them through Upstage Left, Centre and Right and Downstage Left, Centre and Right. The middle part of the stage is just called Centre or Centrestage, thus Centre Left, Centrestage, and Centre Right.**
- d. **Note that these terms are general and would be understood in any theatre, though there are some conventions in professional theatres that refer to the left-hand side of the stage as the 'Prompt Side' [because the prompter's desk is nearly always there in the wings] and the right hand side of the stage as 'Opposite Prompt Side'. All these terms are abbreviated by theatre people as D.S.L. [or P.S.L], U.S.R. [or O.P.R.] to give a couple of examples.**

Keep it simple for the children this first time, and simply get them used to the terms by running to the different parts of the stage. Stick to the main ones in long form: e.g. Upstage Right, Centrestage, Downstage Centre, etc. Add a few other poses to vary the fare:

- tragedy: both hands crossed on breast, mouth pulled down;
- comedy: left arm bent into stomach, body bent slightly over it, mouth open as for [silent] laughter;
- play dead: flat on the floor on stomachs;
- learn lines: hands held up in 'book' shape, head angled to read;
- applause: a deep bow;
- hero: classic 'macho' pose;
- heroine: simpering maiden pose [hands clasped in pleading, upper body angled slightly to one side].

Use as many of these as you feel they can cope with at once, bearing in mind that this is an elimination game; anyone who goes to the wrong stage area or makes the wrong pose is out. As you get into the game, become stricter still and specify that the last to achieve a position or pose is also out. Those who are out become helpers in spotting other wrong moves.

2. * Ask half of the class to sit down in the audience area. The other half take up random positions on the stage. With teacher as director they move according to his instructions. The teacher is testing their understanding of stage directions, particularly looking for the understanding of where left and right is in relation to the audience. The teacher stands in the audience so is speaking of stage left as his own right side.

Direct them like robots:

- e.g. Two paces towards Stage Right. Turn Downstage. Turn and face Upstage, and so on.

When satisfied, do the same with the other half of the class.

3. * The class move into pairs for this next exercise. In pairs, calling themselves A and B, A acts as robot controller and B as the robot. A steers the robot using stage directions, e.g. two paces towards Stage Right. Stop. Turn towards Stage Left. Take four paces, and so on. On a signal from the teacher they then swap over.

This should only take a couple of minutes per person, then ask for a few volunteers to test out their accuracy on the stage area itself in front of the rest of the class.

4. Finish with an improvisation with a difference. Divide the class into small groups of three or four. The setting is a village hall where there is an audition about to take place for the Christmas pantomime. Two of the people are friends but rivals for the same part. The other person or people are newcomers. What happens?

Having worked on their story-line, each player must then describe any stage moves they make. Only those of real significance need to be described or this will be too difficult for them at the moment. For instance:

' Mabel: You knew that was the part I wanted. How could you? [the character in a temper flounces off for example Down Right, and must say so: ' I move Down Right.]

Newcomer, entering: 'I enter Upstage Left and move Centrestage....What's going on here? I thought this was the play auditions..' etc.

An alternative to the above is to have one member of the group who does not take part in the performance but who translates all the moves of all the characters to the audience. The cast must wait for the next line until the description has finished, if this method is used.

Make sure time is left sufficient to see these as it is important that they put their piece on the stage area and are moving in the proper space.

Once again, finish with feed-back and discussion. If they found this last exercise difficult, comfort them: the focus for the session was learning the stage positions. Do they feel they have those at their finger-tops now?

Extract Two

LESSON FIVE

This lesson continues the work begun last week on focus. They should have learned from last week that there are a number of ways to emphasise an entrance or pinpoint a moment of action. The following work will take them further down this route.

1. Start with a game that involves passing the focus from one person to another in the simplest way. The group stand in a circle. A volunteer goes into the circle and does something - anything at all, recites a verse, sings a song, performs a dance-step or an acrobatic move. Whatever he does is applauded loudly by the rest of the class, both for encouragement and for purposes of underlining the fact that the central figure is the centre of their focus. After completing his act, the performer makes eye contact with someone else in the circle and that person joins him. They both perform together the same 'act', the newcomer copying the originator exactly. Then the first performer steps back into the circle. The next person must either perform his own act now or repeat the former person's with one significant change. Once again he is applauded, makes eye contact with a third, and so on.

2. *This game translates well into a simple form of quick improvisation in which the focus is passed in a similar way. Sit the group as an audience or in a horse-shoe shape which leaves one area free for performing. Start by picking two people and giving them a simple situation to act upon. They could be for instance, customer and client in a hairdresser's. They are instructed to play the scene up to the point where they feel it is beginning to flag, when one or the other should bring someone else into the scene, at the same time finding a reason for leaving the scene themselves. For instance, the aforementioned scene could reach a point where the customer is complaining about the ruination of her hair and the hairdresser could at that point say, 'Do you want to speak to the manager? I can see her over there.' And she goes to someone in the audience and brings them out to act as manager.

This exercise is good for passing focus as well as seeing how they fare in spontaneous improvisation, something we shall be looking at in more detail later in the year. Confident members of the class will extend the scene quite creditably but less confident ones will quickly 'pass the buck.' Nonetheless, they will have had to say something and will have experienced what it is like to be in the audience's focus, which is no bad thing for early training in oral work and similar lessons for 'life.'

Some situations will play out quite quickly and need changing before they become too stale or difficult. Other ideas of situations you could give them as starting points are:

- salesperson and client with complaint
- policeman and criminal caught in the act
- vet and customer with unusual pet
- dentist and nervous patient
- foreigner and passer-by asked for directions
- waiter and impatient customer

3. Ask half of the class to go up onto the stage or into the performing half of the studio. The rest remain as audience. The acting half must go into the wings or to the side of the playing area. Then each in turn must make an entrance, remaining on stage once they have done so. Instruct them to find a way of keeping the focus on themselves if they can. Then allow the other half to do the same.

It is important to discuss the findings of this exercise. What kept people watching someone more than another? They should come up with a variety of responses, amongst which I would expect:

the first person entering an empty stage has, obviously, full attention on him. at first, people making 'look-at-me gestures and generally acting the idiot will keep interest until there are too many of them trying to outdo each other. Then the audience switches off and looks at anyone who is acting *differently*.

someone who is staying very still attracts attention.

someone staring directly out at the audience and keeping still.

someone on a different level, higher or lower than the rest,

some parts of the playing area attract more attention, especially Centrestage, or far Down Right or far Down Left.

Of course, they may add other discoveries to this list.

4. As a finishing exercise, see if they can act on the knowledge learned from the above. They are to devise a scene, in groups of about five or six, in which one person is behaving differently from the rest, keeping that person in focus all the time even when other people need to be temporarily in focus themselves. Examples of scenes could be:

a cheerful party with one person crying.

a group of tourists with one partially-sighted or blind person

a solemn ceremony with one person laughing

school break in the playground with one newcomer

business people on train platform with one tramp

people at a smart function with one person dressed inappropriately

Playing scenes like this teaches them that there are various ways of keeping attention on someone, using grouping both around the person and apart from them - let them try to find the best stage positions too for their individual - as well as by the behaviour of that individual, through stillness or just through different activity.

There may not be time to play all of these in front of the others as audience, but there will be enough if you don't insist on a beginning, middle and end for the scene. In other words, give them time to tackle the problems of focus but not so much time that there is none left for showing and feed-back.

In the closing discussion, which should be very full today, see if they have also spotted - from the opening exercise - the power of eye contact for drawing audience's attention. The next two lessons will be on the importance of eye contact.

Extract Three

LESSON SEVEN

This lesson simply continues the work started last week on eye contact, seeking to tie it in more this time to the ideas on focus explored in previous lessons.

1. *Start with a game of 'Wink Murder,' which reminds them in a fun way of the importance of eye contact. Some will be familiar with this game but it is always popular and it does not matter if they have done it before. In any case, give them the extra 'reason' for it by reminding them what we are focusing on at present.

For those who are not familiar with the game, the group sit in a circle [on the floor or on chairs] having already chosen one person to go out of the room as detective. Those sitting close their eyes and bend their heads or bury them in their laps to ensure no cheating. The teacher then walks around the circle, lightly tapping someone between the shoulder-blades. That person is the murderer. His weapon is a wink and he must try to wink at [i.e. kill] as many as possible around the circle, without being spotted by the detective. To do this he must make eye contact with his intended victim before winking at them. All members of the circle must keep their eyes moving around the group at all times, making eye contact with everyone. If winked at, a victim counts up to ten in his head and dies as noisily as he likes; he must take care not to give away who the murderer is by staring at them or by any other means. The detective should actually see the murderer about his business before accusing him.

2. It is said that when duelling with an enemy, a good dueller survived by watching his opponent's eyes and reacting a split second before, because he was able to spot the intention from reading the expression, even before his opponent knew it himself.

Try this out with partners facing each other, locked on with their eyes, hands loosely held by their sides. See if they can read the intention to move in their partner and block it or step away. Each is aiming to place the palm of their hand on their partner's upper arm.

3. Move from this to randomly walking around the room, keeping the eye contact between partners as if they were tied by invisible chains. Try this in a variety of ways:
one person still, the other walking around
both walking together
walking together but with a large distance between them
running.

4. Try next giving some characterisation to this idea of eye contact over distance:
a parent taking a nervous child for their first day at nursery school
two people being separated by force [e.g. Jews in Hitler's Germany]
someone encouraging an apprentice to perform a difficult acrobatic trick
a rescuer encouraging someone across a narrow bridge to safety

5. * Sitting in a horse-shoe or semi-circle - with the open end as the performance area - try a round of 'What am I looking at?'

Volunteers get up and show by their eyes, the expression and their focus what they are looking at and where it is. It could be at an irritating fly, an acrobat on the high-wire, someone on the top of the roof threatening to jump or the arrival of a train, to give a few examples. The exercise is best done if their eye expression is coloured by what they *feel* about what they are looking at.

6. These exercises all explore the power and uses of eye contact. For the last exercise of this lesson, return to the last part of Lesson Five. Here they were exploring passing the focus from one area to another in a crowded scene. Replay either their original idea or another one from that list, this time concentrating on passing the focus from one area to another by eye concentration, e.g. with one person crying at a lively party see if they can find ways of moving smoothly from one area of focus to another either by passing eye contact or simply by using the eyes to steer the audience's attention from one place to another.

As always, gather together and report back.

Extract Four

LESSON FOURTEEN

This picks up and develops the ideas begun in the last lesson about narrative skills, their use in a polished improvisation and how structure can evolve from such work. All of this is very good groundwork for the kind of devised work they will do at G.C.S.E. and beyond.

1. Divide the class up into teams for a mad relay. When the teams are lined up at one end of the room, give them all different modes of movement with which to race. So all Number 1s, for instance, hop; all Number 2s heelwalk. Some other examples are:

running backwards; one person holding the ankles of another who walks on his hands [known as 'wheelbarrow']; bum-shuffling; wriggling on the belly; three-legged [usually done with inner legs of both participants tied together but can be done with one person's foot inside and alongside of his partner's]; crabwalking; crawling on hands and knees etc.

2. * An exercise for speech stimulation is 'No, you didn't.' In this one, the initiator of the idea constantly finds his ideas blocked so has to come up with something else instead. Like, 'Luckily, Unluckily,' the exercise goes around the circle, each person carefully listening because they may be called upon unexpectedly if someone is stuck. Thus:

A: I rode to school on my bicycle today.

B: No, you didn't.

A: You're right, my Mum took me in her car.

This 'successful' outcome means that we move to the next couple in the circle who begin perhaps:

C: I have two pets.

D: No, you don't.

C is not allowed a weak response, e.g. 'You're right, I don't,' but must come up with some positive statement, e.g. 'You're right, I have three counting the new goldfish I won last week at the fair.' If he can't think of anything quickly the teacher begins a countdown [3....2....1] and before 1 is reached C must call out the name of someone else in the group who must come up with an instant response, e.g. 'You're right, John had forgotten about the tortoise he keeps in the shed.'

Successfully rounded off, we move round to E and F and so on. There must be no silences in this exercise; responses are as near instantaneous as possible. This exercise is also good practice for spontaneous improvisation.

3. Divide the class up into groups of around four or five. Each member of the group starts by telling the others something that has happened to them recently. It can be something that happened last week-end or whilst on holiday; it does not have to be exciting; it could simply be relating a satisfactory shopping spree.

Then, taking each 'story' in turn, the group act out each one, taking on characters of friends, parents, shopkeepers, as appropriate.

Having tried them all out, they decide which one worked best and prepare it for performance to the rest of the class in a moment. They must also ask why the others were less successful and be prepared to report back on this too. It could be that there was not enough incident or conflict; or there might have been aspects that they consider to be difficult or impossible to put over [such as a scene which revolves around watching a video].

See if they can identify the reasons; this aspect of the lesson is as important as their eventual choice and showing.

After the showings, make sure that the content and presentation is thoroughly analysed. This must be done in a non-personal way: it is not the personal incident from someone's life that is being criticised here, but its worthiness as material for a play. If it is rambling or boring, what could have been done to make it more interesting?

Brainstorm and collect all ideas.

Acting on these ideas from the rest of the group see if each group can come up with a different way of performing or of presenting the material they had.