

DRAMA *Works*

Plays Through Practice

OH WHAT A LOVELY WAR

by

THEATRE WORKSHOP

EXTRACT

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Extract

action shown, e.g. 'Massive Victory over the Enemy. Casualties Few.'

Try as an alternative not having someone outside the action speaking the headlines, but characters within the scene - even if dead - getting up and saying them.

Discuss fully the different reactions their audience of the rest of the group had to the approaches above. Which did they find most effective?

This will go a long way to helping understand how the style of the play is built up. It is often multi-layered, using contrasting and often contradictory means to send provocative messages to the audience. Before starting on the text, I think it is imperative that the students understand the way in which the material was approached. Littlewood all her life never felt that texts were sacred. To cope with this examination, neither should the students. The play need not be done in exactly the same way as the original was. That would be to set the thing in stone and that would be far from Littlewood's intentions. The way this text should be studied is firstly to understand and try out as far as possible the way in which it was done by Theatre Workshop and secondly to suggest and try out for themselves creative and viable alternatives where appropriate, especially to the production and design methods.

WORKING THROUGH THE TEXT IN A PRACTICAL WAY

From the beginning the exercises assume a knowledge of the play and what happens in it. It is important, therefore, that before you start the following work you will have read the play. At the very least, you should have read the notes on playing style that precede this section.

I try never to be dictatorial in the practical work. There is no version that is more right or more wrong than another. What the following work hopes to encourage is the habit of experiment. Too often, when you read a line it is the first meaning that becomes fixed in the mind. Often this could be just the most obvious and other subtler interpretations might add more meaning to the episode.

It is important that you also get in the habit of recording the results of all the work you do.

Do not be insulted, all you girls, by the use of 'he' as a pronoun in many exercises. I am using it for ease largely - it's so long-winded to say 'he/she' always - and nowadays, in any case, the word 'actor' refers to both the male and female of the species! In this play, in particular, girls can take on male roles if necessary.

ACT ONE

SETTING THE SCENE

Every effort should be made to conjure up the feeling of a lazy summer's day. The opening needs to set both the idea of a pierrot show and the context of a hot Edwardian summer, where war is far from anyone's mind. The actuality of the war will be starker in contrast then.

Consider gentling the audience into the mood by creating a set that includes the auditorium. A plain bare stage, outlined by bunting and fairy-lights. This to surround the audience seating too. Union Jacks hung around. One or two 'stalls' selling ice cream cornets, hot dogs. The audience could be encouraged, like for an old time music-hall evening, to dress in period for the occasion. Cast dressed as pierrots could show people to their seats, inviting people to participate in side-shows on the way. There could be a period 'saucy post-card style' lifesize figure on the way in, with cut-out face, for people to stand behind and show their own face in the gap. Someone could hand

out little union-jacks on sticks.... or sell them and so on. Programmes could be in the shape of flags, or pierrot hats.... A live band could play the audience in, before breaking into the tunes which make up the overture. Try your best to think of ways of reinforcing the idea of a pierrot show on a seaside pier. Perhaps you could go for an outdoor production. Or, given the summer weather at present, a circus-type tent as a location. This option is at least easier for electrical equipment - slide projectors and lights. If you want to tie in these ideas to a particular practitioner, then Craig springs to mind, who liked to see a show as a unified design which includes the auditorium.

The screen for projections, or the entire back wall / cyclorama should be plain white. Littlewood was adamant that the projections should be the visible background to the action at all times. She said, rightly, that if the projections are not a part of the staging, the audience is divided as to where to look. She wanted the pull, sometimes the deliberate contradiction, between what is happening on stage and what the slides are showing or the Newspanel is displaying.

It could be that you have the wherewithal to display a moving relay of news headings. Or, if you like, you could make up slides of the words themselves, perhaps in the form of newspaper headings with sections of the story accompanying them below. The stories might be illegible - it doesn't matter, so long as the headings are there.

The opening Newspanel shows items associated with that English summer just before the War: a hot Bank Holiday [!]; a boxing match where one opponent kicked the other when he was down; Sir Thomas Beecham, founder of the Proms, working on an opera. Is there any other way of emphasising these things other than just the announcements?

Try the following to fuel ideas and discussion:

The company come on during the music of *I Do Like To Be Beside The Seaside*. They take up positions on the stage reminiscent of a hot day on the beach: some play beach games; some lay out a rug and a picnic; some paddle, build castles, and so on. No props. All done in larger than life, clear mime. Think of the style of the saucy postcard - make facial expressions and body language as large as that. Thus, big silent 'squeals' as a toe encounters the cold water; large clear-cut 'concrete' mime to indicate building a sand-castle or opening a picnic hamper. No small or woolly vague movements. For a production, might you want to choreograph this with the music? Or would you want it to be more natural, the music just as a background?

As suggested by the script, the company drift on and take places around the stage. They sit or stand in natural looking groupings, smiling and waving at individual members of the audience. You could extend this, by having people coming onto the stage from all over the auditorium. Some of these may be the ushers, or those who minded the stalls, if you are using that idea.

The company take places all over the stage - as for idea a] or idea b]. They freeze. One of them announces 'Summer 1914.' Another announces 'Scorching Bank Holiday Forecast'. The company unfreeze in a slick, all together movement into another pose, showing the heat of the day - the seaside - etc. They freeze again. Another person announces 'Gunboat Smith Fouls Carpentier in Sixth Round'. The company turn to watch two people miming a dirty boxing blow [slow motion please] - into freeze. The Thomas Beecham announcement could have someone conducting the band, the rest politely clapping and moving their faces and bodies into upper-class expressions. Then freeze once more.

The above are just some suggestions. You can of course just stick to the Newspanel and the script suggestion - which is the second option above.

Discuss where you would want the band. It is a small band of five. It could be on the stage itself, perhaps to one of the sides. Or it could be in front of the stage platform - bearing in mind that this will put the stage itself at one remove from the audience.

Perhaps you would want the band somewhere in the auditorium itself - at the back or to the side. It would depend on your venue, I think. Having them somewhere here may make the audience feel more part of the whole thing. And the band could be one of the side-show events, perhaps on a circular platform, taking place as if on the pier when the audience first arrive.

The set itself is no more than the screen, the newspanel and a bare stage with fairy-lights. The original stage had a balcony also on each side of the stage. Other than that, any levels, seats, ramparts and so on are made of circus-style wooden circular blocks, which are brought on or put into positions as necessary. From now on I shall call these blocks, as she did, 'tubs.' The style is 'poor theatre', as Grotowski would have called it. The script indicates that the same things are used over and over, to represent different objects or props.

I think it is worth considering that two screens are used, angled perhaps towards the back. Slide projections could be on these - perhaps even in duplicate, that is the same image replicated on both sides. Or one screen could show the news items, the other the image. This would free up the back wall or cyclorama for other things. An example would be to have a wash of red, spilling over the back after great loss of life. Shadows thrown up large. The sky, or clouds. Fields of poppies. Whatever. I'll discuss this further when there are specific contexts later to warrant such an idea.

The use of side screens would make the placing of balconies difficult. However, a wheeled balcony, to give height, rather similar to a library stepladder in design, with a little platform on top and rail at the front, might do just as well. Something to consider. This idea would have the advantage of being moveable, so only brought on when necessary.

The M.C. enters, wearing a mortar-board. This in Brechtian 'gestic' terms immediately suggests a teacher and that therefore we are going to be instructed. It is a useful shorthand way of preparing us for lessons.

Once again, the script suggests an easy camaraderie between audience and MC. - in other words, not like a teacher at all. Try the difference. The M.C. enters:

strictly, glaring around him and frowning at particular members of the audience

the same, only jokingly, like a clown-teacher

his body-language is that of an older person, someone who is an authority on his subject. He is friendly and smiles around the audience. He might even ad lib a little, but as this character

though he wears a mortar-board, he is jokey and jolly. He takes the mortar-board off, taps it in a puzzled way - asks which way round it should be worn from someone - and so on. This suggests that this is an actor pretending to be a teacher - an impression intensified by the pierrot costume covering the rest of him.

Play around with mixes and matches of the above. It may be you want to change from, say, the jokey or clown-type teacher, to a serious mood before the announcement that the show is about to begin. This could even be a way of gathering the cast into their new positions for *Row Row Row*.

Littlewood did not want any kind of slick choreography such as is usual for musical theatre. Bearing this in mind, see if you can come up with a movement choreography based on mime rather than dance. The majority of the cast could be divided up in the following ways:

some sitting on individual 'tubs' either miming that they are rowing or using short bamboo canes as oars

two holding the blue cloth between them.

two as Johnny and his girl [who joins hm later] sitting on two tubs in

front of the blue cloth, facing the audience. Johnny mimes rowing.

A more improvisatory and mime feel is retained if other incidents are built in, such as someone punting, as suggested by the script, divers, and swimmers.

You could have a cluster of girls on the 'bank' [a cluster of tubs behind the blue cloth] with Flo as one of them. They all wave and blow kisses at Johnny rowing. Flo is pushed forward by the others and enters the 'boat' cautiously. She sits beside Johnny on the other tub. From then on 'Johnny' doesn't row, but sets about 'spooning' - that is hugging and kissing.

Whilst this is going on, the other rowers do the rowing in time to the 'row, row, row's of the chorus.

Try to make a comic sequence of Johnny's advances, which can happen twice, the second time ending up on the floor with one of Flo's legs in the air, Johnny on hands and knees over her.

The final part of the chorus clearly has everyone picking up their props, standing and facing the audience and bowing.

Try it out adding touches as you go. For instance, the 'oh,oh,oh's' could involve the chorus putting their shocked hands to the mouths, or some such.

Make sure they leave the stage in a chorus type way - waving as they run off, for instance.

Would you have the pierrot's going right off stage, or could part of the staging be benches, or the tubs, lining each side of the stage with costumes and props kept there too? In a Brechtian manner, the pierrots could change visibly. Discuss this as a possibility. As you work through the play, I think it'll become clearer to you whether this idea would work or not. Either way, the shout of 'No!' from offstage suggests the company aren't far away - perhaps a compromise is to have them semi-visible, i.e. to certain sections of the audience, behind the screens.

You might want another sort of compromise: the cast going right off at this point, ready for the big procession to come, but in future not off - or not always. You might want some scenes 'pure' and some watched by the other pierrots. Bear this in mind as a discussion point throughout. Cast observing from the sides can add to the intensity because their focus of attention adds electricity to the scene they are witnessing. It also gives an improvisatory feel. But you may decide that it is distracting to an audience - which it will only be if there's too much changing and getting ready.

A good M.C. is like a stand-up comedian. It is not easy. **For a trial, have each member of the group learn a joke of their choice and deliver it to an audience of the rest of the group. It doesn't matter if the joke isn't funny. It's all in the delivery. The M.C. [no reason why this shouldn't be a girl] has to make eye contact with different sections of his audience; be prepared to pick up on and answer heckling or comments from the audience; keep his voice loud and commanding but also friendly and warm. He must attract an audience, in the sense that it is he who sets the tone for the show and draws the audience attention in. He prepares the ground.**

You could use the jokes as written, if you like. Anyone who cannot find a good joke to tell could just learn these ones. They are clearly chosen for the German reference and the Generals. Discuss whether these jokes are necessary or whether any of your own would do to soften the audience up. How necessary is it to keep topical to the period, even in the jokes? Are there some jokes that the group have brought that are really not suitable at all? Do any of you know any war jokes that would be acceptable? For instance, do you think a joke about a modern war or crisis would work? Something about President Bush and Tony Blair and Iraq, for instance?

Discuss this carefully. With Brechtian theatre, anachronisms are often deliberate. They help widen the sphere of the piece being shown. For instance, in Brecht's *Mother*

Courage and her Children there are references to twentieth century wars and weapons that are distinctly modern, though the play is set in the European Thirty Years' War, which took place mainly in the seventeenth century. The idea is such mixed references will enable the audience to see an antiwar message as not just applicable to one war but to all war. In political theatre in general, the same practices hold good. Steven Berkoff does much the same thing as Brecht in his play *Agamemnon*. Though the setting is ancient Greece and the war is the Trojan War, the soldiers are described, and are shown, with machine-guns, flame-throwers, tanks and the like. The subject being portrayed then becomes all wars and the message, which in this case too is anti-war, is applicable to any war in any generation.

In this case, the ground the M.C. is preparing the audience for is the War Game. The jokes could maybe be more pointed than the ones given here but the tone must remain light all the same. This might begin to change as he announces 'the ever-popular War Game!' Because there is something fairly sinister about the title, there are different ways you could present it. **Try from 'Milords, ladies and gentlemen...':**

like a circus ring-master, making it sound dazzling and exciting, on an upward note

with a dark drum-roll - on a bass drum - which will make the announcement tenser, behind the words. The sentence delivered more seriously

with a strongly ironic emphasis and accompanying slightly sinister look
Which do you think works best?

PRE-WAR TENSION BETWEEN COUNTRIES Pages 3 - 6

The March of the Gladiators is the familiar tune used in circuses to bring on the clowns. It works well for a procession.

The procession introduces us to all the major powers that were involved in this war at its beginning. The single pierrot cart-wheeling can be bumped up by any other members of the group that are left over when the 'countries' are cast. These pierrots could move amongst the more ponderous procession, like a constantly mocking undercurrent.

The countries are distinguished by accurate helmets or army caps of the period. If there is still doubt, then the country's flag could be tied around the character's middle, or the character can be preceded by a pierrot waving the correct flag.

We are reminded by the fact that Ireland is dancing an Irish jig to lead the British contingent, that this is a time of great unrest in Ireland. The Easter Rising will happen in 1916. British troops have moved into Dublin and are seeking to suppress the protesters there. The Irish Troubles are underway.

Great Britain is shown in Victorian splendour. Though Victoria was dead by now, it was in her reign that the Empire spread and consolidated its position to make Great Britain the most important world power at the beginning of the First World War. And it was very much Victorian society and morality that was still to the fore. Thus we have a woman riding on the back of a man with the Empire suggested by a man in a turban holding a sunshade over her. Victoria was not called Empress of India for nothing.

Keeping to the way you have decided to present the news headlines - newspanel or live announcement, these ones here pinpoint what is happening.

Consider backing these up in some way at the beginning of the procession. For instance, Germany giving a token rifle to Ireland.

The M.C. moves freely amongst the members of the procession who, the instruction says, must keep moving. Each one will have to arrive at the front to say their bit, so this must be carefully timed.

The point that is important to get across is that this section of the War Game -