

DRAMA *Works*

Plays Through Practice

WOYZECK
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EXTRACT

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Extract

WORKING THROUGH THE PLAY IN A PRACTICAL WAY

From the beginning the exercises assume a knowledge of the story-line. 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 plot synopsis that precedes this section. I have given the synopses of the two editions I worked with. It might be advantageous to hand out both to the students for use as a comparison.

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.

It is important that you also get in the habit of recording the results of all the work you do. At the end you will need to go through all your work once more, checking that your decisions make sense and are not contradictory.

Note that I have only put an NHB version of a line, in brackets and italics, where it is significantly different from the Methuen one. It is Methuen which is prescribed by EdExcel, and is therefore the one on which I concentrate most attention. But I am mindful of the possibility that other boards have a free choice of text. The NHB version is the other currently available text.

More than many plays, this is one that lends itself to the idea of Brook's 'empty space.' Each scene happens in a different place and the scenes can happen in the order they are given in your text - or another order entirely. This play lends itself to the collaging approach.

The sense of freedom that a director has when confronting this particular text is largely because Büchner never finished the work. The piecing together of the fragments is anyone's guess - who knows the order or even the style that Büchner would have intended for it, [though given the period in which he wrote, it is likely to have been Naturalistic]. So - what delight - it is up to the director and the actors to fill out Büchner's vision in whatever way takes their fancy.

For this reason, I will talk at the end about the setting for the play, though there are suggestions throughout. I think this will largely be a product of the style you find yourself preferring, or the message or impression you want to impart. Until you have worked through the text, examined the richness of the imagery, played with the ideas, you are not going to know what kind of environment for the play you want to create. And, unusually for any play, few props or setting requirements are indicated to confine the actors. All you really need is an empty space in which to conduct your experiments.

SCENE 1 **also Scene 1 NHB**

Woyzeck and Andres, two soldiers, are out in the woods, collecting kindling wood. Woyzeck shares his visions of destruction with his companion.

Read through the scene together first, then, on a second reading, in groups or pairs, make a note of all the images that occur.

Some of these images are portrayals of the state of Woyzeck's mind, some go beyond this to create an image of the world - or at least the world as he sees it. The surreal richness of the imagery builds up a portrayal of the world of Woyzeck's head. It sucks us in and, as the play progresses, shows a consistency that is fascinating and powerfully attractive as well as terrifying.

If we see everything that he sees and hears with his own skewed senses as an image, we have:

a] the head rolling down through the toadstools. Its progress has created a light strip through the grass. It is an ominous sign - a man who picked it up, thinking it was a hedgehog, was dead three days after.

Thus, the first atmosphere set by the play is frightening, creating a sense of death and destruction. The fact that the head is mistaken for a hedgehog, gives a horror idea of hair standing on end, spiked, perhaps stiff with blood, as a decapitated head might be - staring eyes - mouth open on a scream. If you were putting this image into effect visually, there would need to be the moment where we see the spiked head and the movement through the grass as perhaps an animal - then, as the head is lifted up, it turns to an image of horror - which I have tried to show by describing a horror mask idea - the staring dead eyes and mouth.

b] the Freemasons. This sounds the first political note. Freemasonry is a select group of individuals, a secret society of often wealthy and privileged people. Woyzeck is the lowest of the low and the play often demonstrates how the more privileged members of society scorn and torment Woyzeck and, through him, the other poor and needy of the world.

Through the mystery of the decapitated head which is a harbinger of death and the Freemasons who are also mysterious, living 'underground' in Woyzeck's mind since no one knows who they are, we see a picture of Woyzeck's sense of separation from the world - full of people who seem to know their place in society, as opposed to himself who struggles to understand.

c] Andres' song of the hares nibbling the grass appears bland at first, but the hares nibble at the green until the ground is bare. It is an image of destruction. The hares nibble away, slowly destroying the greenness, which is life, until it is no more.

d] the hollowness of the world, which can harbour all sorts of terrifying unknowns, including freemasons.

e] the fire in the sky above the town - another image of destruction that glows and then rages.

f] trumpets, which conjure up images of avenging angels, calls to arms, portents of battle, the 'trump of doom' which heralds the end of the world. This image can mix the real world of army life with the fearful world of omens in which Woyzeck lives.

g] drums. Another image which mixes reality [the call to army duty, as stated by Andres] and a sense of doom.

Silence is contrasted with sound, light with darkness, hot with cold throughout the play. Here the rich world of this imagery is introduced. The fire above the town is as much an image of imminent destruction of the world as Woyzeck perceives it as it is the fire of his blood which so torments him with its heat. The image of a sky bright with avenging angels, suggested by the trumpets is both wonderful and terrifying, setting a mood of terror and mystery as well as coming destruction. It suggests an angry God condemning the world, as He did when he destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah for the sins of the flesh, or when He flooded the world to drown wicked humanity in the time of Noah.

Discuss what resonances these images have within the group. Use them as a starting-point, a platform from which to create a chain of ideas. Make sure that these ideas are recorded. They are the beginning of a collection of ideas and metaphors which will inform your eventual set design and/ or staging of the play.

I think the most important thing to realise - and you will realise it very quickly - is that this play is Woyzeck. The world of the play is the world of his vision. The two things are inseparable. We see him struggle with the separation of his mind and its gradual disintegration into the horror of his tormented vision. At the end the ground itself bleeds, completing Woyzeck's identification with the suffering earth.

Back to this first scene and the start of the play's imagery. Look first of all at everything that suggests sound or the absence of it. Apart from the words spoken, which cover a range of presentation including whispering and singing, we have:

- the splitting of sticks - a sharp cracking sound
- whistling the tune of the song
- the chewing sound [of hares nibbling]
- the sound of something moving - which could be the rolling of the head coming closer
- the hollow echo of Woyzeck's stamping
- the crackling of the fire in the sky
- the blare of trumpets, which are mixed with the sound of the fire
- at least twice - complete silence - a listening breathing silence, that is in itself ominous
- drums - which might move from an ominous sound 'in Woyzeck's head' to the real sound of the call to Army duty. This might perhaps include a trumpet too, this time clearly an army rollcall, for instance.

In groups - depending on your numbers - or a single group, come up with a soundscape for the scene. Create as many of the sounds as you can, using where you have not, say, a trumpet, your voices, feet, hands, percussion instruments, the sounds of your teeth, lips, finger-tips, etc. to establish an atmosphere.

As if you were orchestrating the scene, show clearly where you would want to build the sound to a crescendo, or decrease it to nothingness. What is the effect of the silence at the end before the drum begins? How loud should the sounds be when Woyzeck drags Andres into the bushes?

This is one of the choices a director could make when producing this scene, and it is an important decision: whether to make the world that the audience perceives on stage the same as Woyzeck's world. That is, do you, as directors, decide to put the audience into Woyzeck's head? This would mean seeing what he is seeing, hearing what he is hearing. It is an important decision and possibly not one you should make until you have studied the play fully. Exploring Woyzeck's vision would put the play into the realm of surrealism and Artaud. But there are other ways in which the play could be done too: as a piece of political theatre, using some of the ideas of Brecht, or even naturalistically, following the inspiration of Stanislavski.

Let's try the naturalistic way first. For this, the portrayal of Woyzeck is that of a man in the middle of a delusion. Like acting drunk, madness is one of those things that are very hard to act convincingly. Before beginning the text, try this exercise:

Each student individually finds a place alone in the studio, on a chair or sitting on the floor. In the mind each one thinks of some episode they have heard of in some one's life [or their own if appropriate] which might trigger off a delusion, or odd behaviour that over years might lead to a delusory state of mind. For example, I will tell you a couple of things from my own experience.

When I was about seven years old I started making my own way to my piano lessons at the Wilson and Peck building in the middle of Sheffield. I would walk from my school to the tram. One time sitting on the tram I saw a woman with a galvanised metal bucket on her head sitting there. No one took a lot of notice of her and I saw her often thereafter. Once when I had decided to walk to the swimming baths after school, I saw this same woman walking in the middle of the road, still with a bucket on her head. Traffic

moved around her - she took no notice of it. Later this same woman was taken to a sanatorium, having been found sheltering in a barrel. The story in the paper was that she had lost her brother in the Second World War whilst she had been walking with him along the pavement. A bomb fell and a wall fell outwards onto the pavement crushing her brother but leaving her unscathed. But from there on she would never use a pavement and wore protection on her head. There is always a sane root to madness.

My own mother has Alzheimer's disease. When my father sent her to a home for a week's respite, her brain tried to make sense of her change of circumstances by inventing scenarios. One time when I visited she behaved as though we were at a party. She introduced me to the hostess, another inmate, and commented unfavourably on the food. Then she announced conspiratorially, and with her best party smile, that it was, she felt, time to leave. 'Not a very lively party,' she said. Another time, she hugged me with relief and looked wild-eyed around her. 'You've got through,' she said breathlessly. 'How did you manage, through all those bombs and blockades?' She had heard something on television about Afghanistan perhaps and instantly that is why she was in this place with all these people. They were refugees in a shelter and somehow, to her relief, one familiar member of her family had 'got through' to be with her.

The point I am making is that, though it is sometimes hard to find, there is always a root cause for any form of delusory behaviour. In this scene, we see Woyzeck in the middle of his delusion. Why has Büchner done this? It is a strange beginning - though perhaps, of course, it is not how he would have begun the play if he had finished it. Later, we find the root cause, which is the torment he is undergoing particularly from the Doctor, including his strange diet of peas, which exacerbates a tendency he perhaps already has. The later torment of Marie's affair with the Drum Major pushes his unstable mind even further along its path. In general, Büchner makes clear that Woyzeck's particular form of madness arises from long-lasting ill-treatment of him by those of a higher social rank. He has been subjected to, one imagines, years of bullying, of being the underdog.

So, the students need each to think of something they have heard of, observed or experienced, which might, under certain circumstances - such as food or sleep deprivation - create a delusory state. The behaviour they then develop arises from this. For instance, a feeling of loss from having missed a train and consequently not seen a loved one ever again, might cause an obsession with looking at a watch or with time in general. A feeling of having control taken away from someone might result in obsessive tidying up or organising objects, as a way of taking some control over whatever environment in which they find themselves. Lady Macbeth, unhinged by the murder she has been party to, becomes obsessed with the washing off of imaginary blood 'Out, damn spot' - her hands constantly rubbing together as if washing. King Lear, unhinged by the cruelty of his daughters, puts them on trial, using pieces of furniture to represent them. His dwelling on his daughters is obsessional.

Many years ago now, I acted in a production of the *Marat/Sade*. We had to do this exact exercise as part of our preliminary work. Of course, the characters in this play are mad people playing sane people, since they enact the story of the murder of Marat in his bath. We had to work to create the reasons why they were mad, and then, despite their efforts to act 'sane' characters, certain tics or obsessional movements would betray their inner state. This whole exercise and the reasons behind it is very Stanislavski.

Having explored the idea of how people become lost in their own world of delusion, invent an improvisation in which normality and one or two of these delusionals interact:

in a queue

in a waiting-room

in a shop or restaurant

Now look more specifically at the type of madness Woyzeck presents. He hears sounds. Later on he hears voices telling him to kill Marie. He sees visions, or at least distortions of things that are really there. He is suspicious of all those of a higher status

and the things they belong to, such as freemasonry. He has been bullied, not listened to and actively maltreated.

Stand in the studio, not facing each other but quite randomly. Whatever objects you see, imagine they distort into something else. Sometimes these might be frightening, at other times wonderful or exhilarating. Imagine sounds, or perhaps the small sounds you hear in the background may become exaggerated and, again, distorted. Sounds of the playground outside, for instance, could sound like an angry crowd coming to get you, or like the inhabitants of hell. The ticking of the clock could become the beating of a heart or the voice of doom. And so on.

This exercise should be done in complete silence, each student behaving as if he were on his own. Stretch the senses in silence - perhaps in near blackout too, if possible? - listen to things around you and look at the shapes of things in the gloom. Use your imagination and just listen and look at first. Then allow your listening and looking to impact on your body language and face. Feeling something is coming straight at you in a threatening way, for instance, will mean a flinching in the body, perhaps a sheltering of the head under the forearms.

Now take this further, imagining that you are habitually ill-treated: beaten, cuffed, shouted at.... If you expect blows or shouts, how does this affect your body language?

Try having the class divided into two parallel lines, making a corridor. Down this corridor, each person in turn makes his way. The corridor of people all shout abuse, threaten to hit or kick, act angrily. Though no blow should actually land, what does the person walking down this corridor start to walk like? How does it affect the way he carries his head and body? How does it affect the way he walks?

Having tried the full on effect of the corridor, move onto a more separated 'corridor' - plenty of room between each abuser, so that the person journeying through experiences each form of abuse separately. They move in the way that they have begun to by the end of the first more full-on corridor. They are beginning to experience the way that Woyzeck may be feeling - his habitual way of moving perhaps.

This way of moving does not mean that Woyzeck is like this all of the time. Remember that in acting it is always easier to tone down an exaggeration than to build from something that is too underplayed. Instead of a habitual way of moving and standing, this exercise may lead to a tendency - a way of moving or standing that he falls into when he fears abuse is coming his way.

We'll look now in more detail at the situation of the first scene. Woyzeck and Andres are in the woods. They are both soldiers, presumably enjoying a moment of leisure. Or perhaps they have been sent out to find firewood, since Andres is splitting sticks, presumably to make kindling. Are they in uniform or only in a suggestion of uniform since they are off-duty? Something to decide later when you have decided how to present the play.

The sparseness of the stage directions allow a director and designer to use his imagination as to setting. Setting could be:

a simple blank stage with white cyc or wall at the back. On this, depending on your final decisions, could be projected a real wood, or the shadows or suggestive shapes of trees, or the roiling colours and shapes of Woyzeck's hallucinations

the setting could be made by the cast, carrying sticks or branches perhaps, using them to create rustles or drumbeats. They might create different configurations, for instance clumping together to create the bushes in which the two cower on Page 5.