

# **DRAMA** *Works*

**Plays Through Practice**

**YERMA**  
by  
**LORCA**

**EXTRACT**

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# Extract

## WORKING THROUGH THE PLAY IN A PRACTICAL WAY

Please note that what I offer is simply a method of working, with a number of creative ideas to try out. I have tried to keep these as broad as I can. There is no need to adopt any of these ideas if you don't want to. I have written them as a way of starting groups of students out on their own journeys of creative exploration and hopefully this will happen. If it doesn't, there are always these ideas to fall back on.

Make sure that all decisions made as the students work through are recorded by them. This should build up into a useful practical commentary on the whole play.

### **ACT ONE, SCENE ONE**

#### THE OPENING STAGE DIRECTIONS

We begin with a dream - Yerma's dream. In it a shepherd brings in a small boy. This is clearly the unborn - and never to be born - child that Yerma should have. He is dressed in white to suggest perhaps the heavenly state - innocence - unreality. His fixed stare at Yerma is perhaps of yearning, or to show the audience a link between the two.

The above is the dream; reality is shown by the embroidery frame and then the lighting change to a sunny spring morning.

The stage direction plunges us straight into the core of what the play is about - Yerma's longing for a child, especially a son. It tells us that Yerma's wish is a possibility - the child is waiting to be conceived, to be brought from the dream into reality. This could confirm what we are later told: that Yerma is not barren; it is her husband, Juan, who is sterile.

Starting with the eeriness of a dream is a challenge, but something of great beauty could be made out of it. Here are a number of potentials to try:

**Set the scene for the whole play by using some of the previously worked on sequential movements. These could happen all around the central figure of sleeping Yerma, both setting the scene of the peasant culture, the rhythm of the seasons and the main motif of the play, the role of women. I feel it is necessary to educate the audience in this way - absorbing them in peasant and archetypal culture and rhythms - though there would have been no need to do this for an audience in Spain in Lorca's day. Try to set the atmosphere of Spain, too.**

**This large group work could freeze, and out of it comes the figure of the child led by the shepherd, who move toward the sleeping Yerma and seem to bless her, or make some connection with her - through the eyes - the child's head tipped perhaps to one side as he stares, to show yearning. The clock strikes and the Chorus, including Shepherd and child 'dissolve' - leaving quickly, quietly, smoothly. Leave the Shepherd and child to stay frozen until the others have gone.**

**You could try having the embroidery frame as a large white screen, edged with wood. On it are drawn the figures of the Shepherd and Boy. These characters in the dream, emerge from behind the screen as if they have come to life and at the end of the dream, return behind the screen again. When the light comes up we see their figures drawn, and partly filled in, as if part finished by Yerma's own hand.**

**The Shepherd is surely a religious reference, as well as being a link to the men's roles within the play. This is confirmed by the white-robed child, still in Heaven waiting to be born.**

Once the introductory choric movement has frozen, try establishing an eerie hum to accompany the movement of the Shepherd and Child. Keep it up all the time they are trying to make contact with Yerma. The hum is best achieved by a deliberate soft discord, rather than a single note. Have the students hum the first note that comes into their head and then hold that note rather than adapting to the notes of their neighbours.

You may decide you want a quieter start. Try just having the Shepherd and child moving forward in a trance-like way - gliding, slow motion and then stopping close to Yerma. Keep all movement painfully slow, eerie. Perhaps accompany this either with a soft hum, made by the group 'off-stage', or with occasional soft instrumental sounds - a soft rattle - a brief tinkle of bells - the gentle brushing of a tabor -all as if blown on the air.

When the clock strikes, interrupting the dream and bringing us back to reality - the pace changes and Shepherd and boy, retaining the gliding movement [feet hardly lifted from the floor, body still] move off quite fast.

By the way, this gliding movement is easy to achieve by first having the actors balance a cane [7' long minimum] on their heads. Focusing their eyes on the tip of the cane in front of them, they must move forward without it falling off their heads. The body memorises the gliding motion achieved when the canes are removed.

Experiment with light for this scene. Using a couple of standing lanterns and different colour gels, try in a darkened space to achieve the optimum dreamlike effect. Grey-blues and ice-blues, warmed by pinks, would be a starting point.

Next try to find the right colour gels for the suggested sunny spring morning. Oranges, yellows and pinks would be a starting-point.

I think all the students should be a part of this trial, not just those interested in lighting - but if you have a 'Techy' in your midst, all the better - he'll be a good resource! In the examination, it is important that when describing how to achieve effects, there is real practical knowledge informing the work.

A nice idea would be to have the two dream figures walking into the bright sunshine when it comes in, so that they disappear into very bright light - a spotlight trained right at them from the wings. This can then be toned down to become part of the general lighting effect - or be faded out once they have disappeared. This moving into a bright light would enhance the dream effect and help the suggestion that the dream is in some way a blessing - sent by Heaven. Try this idea too.

Last note on this opening! Lorca's staging is always minimal. You need to make a decision about a 'bed'. If a raised rostrum or similar is used - which is also part of the whole setting, so that there is no need to remove it, that is one possibility. Yerma would have to be propped up slightly and with her face towards the audience - Juan in shadow, a humped figure under the sheet with his back to us.

My personal choice would be not to have any kind of bed on stage. Yerma, we are told in the play, often wanders about at night. Perhaps she has fallen asleep in her chair, next to her embroidery frame, head nodded forward onto her chest. This option is much easier and means that she can call Juan off-stage, where presumably the bedroom is. This option also emphasises the important distance between the couple.

[Set design ideas as a whole will be tackled after working through the whole play.]

YERMA AND JUAN [from begin to Page 161/ *from begin to 101.*]

Yerma is still in the good feeling left over in her by the dream. She sings to the baby that she has dreamed of in her sleep. Singing she bustles off to call Juan, and bustles back on again with a dish of milk for his breakfast. Bleary Juan enters, buckling his belt, tucking in his shirt - finishing getting dressed to go out to the fields. Yerma fusses over Juan; he is irritated by this. She wants an outlet for her maternal caring; he rejects it. There is a frisson of alarm as she contemplates the years stretching ahead - years of no change, the two of them getting older. Juan looks forward with pleasure to increasing prosperity and comfort, with no children draining their finances. Yerma doesn't respond directly to this but turns the conversation to love, reminding Juan how willingly she came to him as a bride. She wants to wear him down with her love, as 'rain loosens/ softens stone.' This is a biblical reference about the scattering of the mustard seed - some of which fell on stony ground, withered and died. But the seed in this case is male seed. The implication is that 'people' are talking about their childlessness; his seed falling on stony ground implies Yerma as the barren one. But Yerma is gently criticising him for not persisting. Rain [always connected in this play with male seed] might soften her stone if enough opportunities are made. This whole conversation makes Juan uncomfortable; perhaps he doubts his own virility and hates the fact that they are objects of gossip. Yerma wants to make love more, to give them a chance for a baby; but Juan is closing in on himself. The last part of the dialogue introduces Juan's obsession with Yerma staying in the house, out of sight of gossips and scandal-mongers. This could also be Juan compensating for his lack of power sexually, by throwing his weight around as boss in his home.

We will look at this dialogue naturalistically first. Though not a naturalistic play, understanding of the real human plights that lie behind it are necessary. Sometimes, though couched in symbolic terms, the human subtext must be made clear.

**1. Consider the following lines. What is the sub-text behind each one?**

a] Yerma: 'You're too thin with all the work you do. / *You work a lot and your body's not strong enough for it.*  
Juan: 'Lean men are like steel.' / *When men grow thin they get strong as steel.'*

Try: Yerma maternal, concerned; critical; irritable, he's turning down her efforts; with a sub-text of 'you're unmanly because so thin.'

Try: Juan proud, boastful; with a sense of humour, trying to diffuse the situation; prickly/ defensive - tone of are you trying to say I'm not a man?

Experiment with different combinations of these. Which works best?

b] Yerma: 'Why don't you go down to the river and have a swim? Or go up the roof and let the rain beat down on you.' / *'I'd like to see you go to the river and swim or climb up on the roof when the rain beats down on our house.'* Remember the connection symbolically between water and sex/ male seed. Does this make a difference to how you say the line? Is Yerma actually being, if not exactly bitchy, at least suggesting that he is less than a man?

c.] 'That's how I am and that's how I'd take care of you.' / *'That's the way I am. That's why I take care of you.'*

Juan: 'And I'd be grateful.' / *'I'm grateful.'*

Try :Yerma overdoing the cloying care and Juan feeling suffocated as the subtext to his response.

Yerma yearning - perfectly sincere; Juan irritated, rejecting.

Yerma very intense; Juan suspicious - tone of what does she want?

The sub-texts to the the next two are quite obvious. Try making them absolutely clear in tone, body language and facial expression.

d.] Yerma: 'Every year ... just the two of us year after year.' / *'Each year. You and I will just go on here each year...'*

e.] Yerma: 'No, no children ... Juan? .... You know I love you?' / *'We've no children... Juan! ... I love you don't I?'*

2. Divide the whole short dialogue up into 'units' according to pace and where you feel the pace should change. This will be dependent on what is going on sub-textually.

e.g. getting ready for work at the beginning- even Yerma's song - is brisk, fast. It probably changes on Juan's 'What for?' wondering why he should have milk. Then again - a beat before his response 'lean men are like steel.' / *'When men grow thin ...'* And so on. Try to decide on the pace for all this dialogue. Make sure that the pace - and any pauses - help reveal the undercurrents, the sub-text.

3. This preliminary work should help you with movement. Working to keep clear outlines to all your movements, decide what each character is doing in each of the 'units' you have decided on.

Now just perform the movements, without the speech. This will help you simplify and slightly exaggerate each gesture - once again, because I think it is imperative that the outlines of this play are crystal clear - not cluttered, as so often with a naturalistic approach.

N.B. Though I use words like sub-text and units, I do not mean to suggest that this play is naturalistic in the Stanislavskian sense. It is however 'real' in a universal sense and explores a female predicament that should be 'felt' by an audience. Symbolism is not naturalism; it searches for universal, archetypal truths that are present even in everyday lives.

4. Return to the text and, remembering all this preliminary work, repeat the scene with clear movement and the underlying meanings exposed, through pacing and pauses as well as intonation.

If the scene looks too naturalistic, too loose, even after all this, try emphasising the main ideas in a non-naturalistic way - symbolically. In this dialogue, we need to have a sense of the distance between the two of them. Emphasise this by putting them in unusual juxta-positions to each other at times: back to back; facing away from each other at strange angles, for instance. How does this look?

Can Juan's attempt at gaining mastery over Yerma towards the end of the dialogue be emphasised symbolically: by Juan taking a dominant position through standing higher? by pressing down on Yerma's head to force her down? Try these, and other ideas you might have.

YERMA'S SONG [PAGE 161/ 101.]

Yerma is not cast down for long by Juan. She is still hopeful at this stage of the play. She sings a song of yearning and hope to her unborn child, whilst sewing at her embroidery frame. The movement of her hands threading the needle and sewing should have a dreamy, ritualistic quality - in rhythm with the song.

1. Notice the movements described in the stage directions before the song begins which could be performed in a languorous ritualistic way, as an introduction to the speed and rhythm of the song. Try this out.

**There are a number of options [including, I am sure many I have not thought of] for the performance of this song. Discuss and try out as many as possible.**

**It could be done straight, with the ritualistic sewing as I have indicated, to a simple composed 'nursery rhyme' type simple tune.**

**It could be chanted, perhaps with the women's chorus humming behind.**

**Try as an alternative, having the female chorus picking up certain words Yerma chants and repeating them, like an echo. Or having a double chorus, one acting as Yerma's echo, the other chanting as the voice of the child.**

**Like a Greek Chorus, some of the rounded mothering shapes explored previously could be used as a movement background here. Keep them simple, repetitive and unobtrusive. The last thing we want is the feel of a musical with chorus line!**

**Try clarifying certain lines, such as having the 'Yerma/Mother Chorus' bringing the material of their dresses or skirts, to roundly enfold an imaginary baby, whilst the Child Chorus gently wrap their own arms round themselves.**

**Observe the rhythms of the repeated chorus 'How the branches dance in the sun...' / '*Let the branches tremble in the sun...*' which are sharper and more alive. Can some staccato claps or stamps emphasise this?**

**Perhaps Yerma can become caught up in the 'dance' too, acting out certain parts and breaking away from her sewing for this, e.g. taking the imaginary hand of an imaginary child and, stooping down, showing him the 'wonders' she describes ... the dog...the trees ... the oxen ... the moon.**

**Though the verse about 'my poor womb will be torn' / '*for you I'll torn and broken be...*' sounds dire, I don't think the mood of the song should change here. It is still full of hope and yearning; Yerma would embrace the pain of birth with joy, because of the longed-for outcome of that pain.**

#### NOTE ABOUT SETTING

Bringing a chorus line on and off is not an option! Consider the possibility of having the female 'chorus' on the rim of the playing area at all times. I think I would make my playing-space circular - to symbolise the womb. If the women were sitting cross-legged, or squatting peasant-fashion, round the outside it would serve a number of purposes:

ease of bringing them on and off with minimum fuss

emphasising the themes: the circle, the peasant cycle, the womb

giving a claustrophobic feeling to the play. Scenes where Yerma feels trapped could be emphasised by the circle drawing inwards. It also emphasises Juan's fear of being laughed at, watched, a subject of gossip. At the end, Lorca indicates crowds of people closing in on Yerma's final act; she is always under public scrutiny and feels the pressure.

#### MARIA AND YERMA [PAGE 162 - 165 / 102 - 105.]

Maria, after only five months of marriage, is pregnant. The purpose of this dialogue is to contrast Yerma's barrenness with another woman's easy fertility. The miracle of a baby is put into beautiful terms by Yerma, using the softest of language and symbols; the second half of the dialogue, by contrast, shows the other side of childbirth - the blood, the pain, the nuisance. Both sides, says Yerma, are a part of the whole experience of