

# The tower block: developing devised work reflecting a theatrical style

# A2

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## A2 – AQA practical exam

### Introduction

This scheme of work takes students through the planning of a devised piece of practical work that fulfils the demands of the AQA A2 practical exam. It reflects the development of a Physical Theatre style, but, it can be easily adapted to reflect any style appropriate for DRA 4. The aim of the scheme of work is to encourage students to think imaginatively about how to create a journey on stage, and thereby understand the importance of transitions and their contribution to the overall effectiveness of a piece. It also enables students to create large amounts of work quickly.

This scheme encourages the development of a planned rehearsal schedule which allows teachers to set achievable goals relating to preparation marks. Most importantly, it reflects the need to demonstrate understanding of a specific theatrical style. Too often students approach their A2 practical exam thinking that it is just an extension of their practitioner-influenced AS exam, so Artaud-inspired AS students create Theatre of Cruelty-style A2 pieces, but allow their work to still be dominated by Artaud. Peter Hall-inspired AS work becomes naturalistic at A2, but is still mostly Peter Hall influenced.

I think the fundamental difference between the two practical exams is that, in order to demonstrate a fully integrated style of theatre, students should be recognising the contribution made to that development by a range of practitioners. Therefore, in order to provide my students with the best knowledge of physical theatre, we build on their study of Artaud at AS by introducing them to, in detail, Steven Berkoff. We also work with Splendid Theatre Company through their productions and physical theatre workshops. We include physical techniques associated with Grotowski's Poor Theatre and the students see a production by Frantic Assembly and then attend a workshop with them. Finally, we go through revision of the Greek Chorus, which we previously studied through *Antigone*, in order to link Berkoff's work on ensemble to material the students have already studied, building on skills learned at AS.

In this scheme, students go on a devised journey up through a tower block, during a supposed disaster outside of the building. The journey involves a movement upwards through the tower block, and the students are required to plan the journey and encounter a series of characters on the way. The development of the journey and the approach to characterisation must reflect those practitioners that they have studied, allowing research to be carried out that forms part of the Supporting Notes documents. The development of the journey upwards, towards the climactic moment as they reach the roof, becomes a series of targets where they can show their work, demonstrate specific physical and vocal techniques, and gradually integrate those techniques so they clearly move past the idea of a practitioner study into a well-rounded demonstration of a theatrical style. Each floor represents a practitioner's style, until they reach the top where they create a scene integrating them all into a piece of physical theatre.

During this journey, characters will be created who suffer from a specific type of phobia, which impacts on their ability to interact with others. There are some phobias suggested here, but obviously teachers can adapt and change these according to the needs of their groups.

### Personal, learning and thinking skills

- ▶ Developing physical performance skills
- ▶ Research into particular practitioners/styles
- ▶ Experimentation with audience position
- ▶ Building experience of devising
- ▶ Pair and ensemble work
- ▶ Building minutes of practical work quickly
- ▶ Developing devising skills and creating plot.

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**Suggested resources**

1. *The Theatre and Its Double* by Antonin Artaud
2. *Artaud* by Martin Esslin
3. *Steven Berkoff and the Theatre of Self-Performance* by Robert Cross
4. *Towards a Poor Theatre* by Jerzy Grotowski
5. *The Frantic Assembly Book of Devising Theatre*
6. *The Director and the Stage* by Edward Braun
7. Access to a production by Frantic Assembly – the Digital Theatre archive has Frantic’s production of *Lovesong* in its database
8. Workshops by Splendid Theatre Company and/or Frantic Assembly on physical theatre/devising
9. ‘Five Truths Antonin Artaud’, National Theatre YouTube channel resource
10. A copy of the film *Alien* using a clip from the sequence where Dallas goes in search of the alien through the air ducts of the ship
11. DVD version of Steven Berkoff’s *The Trial*
12. *Antigone* by Sophocles or any other studied Greek tragedy
13. A clip of a Greek chorus, or modern Greek chorus in action.

## Lesson 1: Structuring a devised piece and building a journey

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**Learning objectives**

- ▶ Building research notes for Supporting Notes
- ▶ Developing imaginative approaches to movement and transitions between scenes
- ▶ Working as an ensemble
- ▶ Developing stylised vocal skills
- ▶ Beginning to demonstrate a particular theatrical style through the specific techniques of one practitioner
- ▶ Demonstrating the rejection of set and a physical approach to the creation of location
- ▶ Revision of key practitioner techniques at AS.

**Revision of AS techniques associated with Artaud (5 mins)**

Place students in a half circle and then ask them to write down everything they can remember that they associate with their AS practitioner, in terms of performance techniques. Give them exactly 2 minutes and tell them that they must have written at least ten techniques. Hopefully, in relation to Artaud, they will have some of the following:

- ▶ Exaggerated facial expression
- ▶ Wide eyes
- ▶ Jerky, angular movement
- ▶ Graceful, balletic poise
- ▶ Circular patterns of movement
- ▶ Screams, shouts, groans, chants, song
- ▶ Incantation and ritual
- ▶ Influence of Balinese Dance
- ▶ Gyration
- ▶ Moving hieroglyphs
- ▶ Trance-like state
- ▶ Intense symbolic gesture
- ▶ Physical pulsation.

Place students into pairs, and ask them to narrow down their list of techniques into the five most important/successful ones that they used last year. List all those techniques on the board. It can be very useful at this stage to show students the Artaud section of the ‘Five Truths’ National Theatre YouTube resource to remind them of the specific skills associated with Artaud.

**Theory in practice (30 mins)**

Draw a simple tower block design on the board. Give it at least five levels and explain that each level is now inhabited by just one individual who suffers from a particular phobia. The individual who lives alone on the ground floor is terrified of going outside and is constantly afraid that someone is going to break in.

Place the students into small groups and ask them to rehearse quickly a soundscape that reflects the idea of a riot going on outside the building. Briefly

mind map ideas that could be associated with that situation.

- ▶ Police car sirens
- ▶ Shouting
- ▶ Breaking windows
- ▶ Sounds of fire
- ▶ Knocking on doors
- ▶ Screaming/crying
- ▶ Running/footsteps.

Now ask students to begin to improvise a scene where one character is woken up by the noise of the soundscape outside and they react in a panicked manner, rushing around the flat reacting to the noises outside, fearful that someone is trying to break in. They should be checking windows, doors, hiding under beds, in wardrobes, etc. The scene should be kept short – no more than 60 seconds – but it must have a definite beginning and must finish with the moment when the character is convinced that someone is trying to break in through the front door. The soundscape must continue throughout the scene. Ask them to polish and rehearse and then choose one scene only to show. On viewing, ask students to suggest ideas on how the scene could be developed and changed in order to reflect much more clearly the influence of Artaud.

- ▶ How could a more dream-like style be created?
- ▶ How could vocal skills be developed to reflect Theatre of Cruelty delivery?
- ▶ How could the soundscape be developed to become more nightmare-like?

Ask students to go back now and re-rehearse their pieces so they are clearly inspired by the work of Artaud. Make it clear that they must demonstrate at least ten of the techniques initially placed on the board. Allow students the rest of the lesson to rehearse with the expectation that they will be performed next lesson.

### Homework

Find an appropriate piece of atmospheric music that could be played during the piece to create a suitably threatening/paranoid atmosphere.

## Lesson 2: Focus on transitions and introduce Berkoff techniques

### Learning objectives

- ▶ Using space and levels imaginatively
- ▶ Multi-roling
- ▶ Developing a physical actor-based approach to the creation of set.

### Rehearse performances to soundtrack (20 mins)

Give students time to polish performances devised in the last lesson and use soundtrack. Make sure that each performance now finishes with a moment where the central character escapes from the flat in a dramatic fashion, and we see their fear at leaving. This moment must be played in slow motion, and the soundscape should then be used to reflect the thoughts going through the mind of the character and the sounds associated with their dramatic escape. For example:

- ▶ Repetition of key words/phrases going through the character's mind at that moment – reflecting Artaud's ideas for chanting/ritual
- ▶ The sounds of escape - breaking glass/doors being forced open
- ▶ The sounds of people outside trying to force their way in.

The other actors in the scene should build the soundscape at that moment up to extreme levels, to reflect the character's emotional state. Watch performances and play the chosen music during them to create atmosphere; ask spectators to watch and list the Artaud techniques on show. Discuss what the soundtrack added and how the soundscape was used to heighten the sense of fear.

### Building transitions and developing the sense of a journey physically

Use the remainder of the lesson for this task.

Explain that the central character from the ground floor has decided to escape from the supposed intruders and is forced to journey upwards, to the next floor. Explain that the electrics are out and they are unable to use the lift, so they need to climb up into the ceiling and will travel along the air ducts and ventilation shafts between each floor. Explain also, that the actor playing the central character must change, in full view of the audience, but that it must be absolutely clear that they are still the same character. Briefly mind map ways of achieving this role swap in a stylised but clear way. For example:

- ▶ The use of an item of costume or a prop associated with that character and the 'dressing' of the new actor for that character onstage

- ▶ A stylised movement where one actor 'steps into' the other
- ▶ Using other actors to circle the first actor so that they disappear and are replaced during the 'circling'
- ▶ The use of direct audience address explaining the role swap.

Ask students to plan and rehearse their role swap and watch them. Ask for comments about which are the most effective/interesting to watch. Ask students to consider the way that they will present the journey through the 'tunnels' to the floor above. Remind them that there must be no use of any props or set and that the journey must be a combination of mime and the physicality of the actors involved. This sequence directly relates to Berkoff's rejection of set and replacement of it with the actors' physical actions. The journey must feature some of the following obstacles.

- ▶ A trap door up into the ceiling
- ▶ A thin, shallow corridor
- ▶ A gap in the tunnel where there is a drop back down
- ▶ Moments when the tunnel becomes hot
- ▶ Moment where there is more than one tunnel to choose from and a decision has to be made
- ▶ Ladders
- ▶ The constant sense that the character is being followed or chased
- ▶ Moments where there is someone directly below them and they are terrified of being heard.

The other cast members must physically create those obstacles using their bodies so the central character can climb on or use them. They should also create appropriate sounds during the journey to create atmosphere/tension. These sounds can be:

- ▶ Creaking sounds or unsafe floor boards
- ▶ Muffled voices below
- ▶ More imaginative sounds, e.g. increased breathing to reflect the effort of the journey
- ▶ Heartbeats.

The journey should last approximately ninety seconds. It is useful to use the clip from *Alien* to give an impression of the sort of journey needed, and the restricted space available. Ask students now to rehearse and polish the second part of the scene, showing the character change and the journey to the next apartment above. Ask them to finish the journey scene on the arrival at the front door above and finish with them just about to knock on the door, desperate to get in. One cast member must play the door, again reflecting Berkoff's rejection of set, and other members should soundscape the knocking sound. Show scenes at the end of the lesson.

Groups now have approximately two and half minutes of devised work, that is beginning to reflect a physical style of theatre.

#### Homework

Research obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD).

### Lesson 3: Using Berkoff's 'mime that talks'

Allow students the first five minutes of the lesson to run pieces so far to keep them fresh. Discuss OCD research and list associated symptoms – ritual, repetition (concepts clearly associated with Artaud's performance style), counting, routine, fear of not completing that routine, etc. Now ask students to devise the morning ritual of someone who suffers from OCD, from the moment they awake, getting washed and dressed, through breakfast to the moment when they reach their front door to go out. This scene should be approximately ninety seconds long.

Explain that on this occasion, the actor who was the lead character in the previous journey scene is going to direct this scene only, and not appear in it. They are to freeze at the end of the journey just as they knock desperately on the door of the flat above and will remain frozen during the next scene. The scene must start again with a clear method of showing that the actor playing the OCD sufferer has changed – so the role swap is again clear, and this will be used for every new scene. The same method used at the end of the first scene can be employed.

The cast are now going to create the bedroom physically: furniture, bathroom, clothes, kitchen and appliances belonging to the OCD sufferer as they go through their morning ritual. The ritual must start with waking up in bed and must

contain the following events, all with associated, exaggerated sounds created live by the voices of the actors, but not the central character.

- ▶ An alarm clock waking them up
- ▶ Throwing back the bed clothes
- ▶ Opening the wardrobe door, choosing clothes and getting them out
- ▶ Trying them on in front of the mirror
- ▶ Brushing teeth
- ▶ Heading downstairs and showing that change in levels
- ▶ Putting toast in toaster
- ▶ Boiling a kettle and pouring tea
- ▶ Checking the time – constantly
- ▶ Heading towards the front door (at which point the ‘frozen actor’ from the previous scene will unlock and strike the front door – bringing both characters together).

This instantly introduces students to the Berkoff concept of ‘mime that talks’ and reinforces his rejection of set and props. It can be very useful at this stage to watch the opening clip of Berkoff’s own directed version of *The Trial* as the opening sequence deals with the central character and is then surrounded by individuals performing their morning rituals. The actors must play the objects and furniture to be used in the scene and make appropriate noises for them. It can be interesting to experiment with objects that have a personality or attitude to the OCD sufferer. So a wardrobe can be outraged by the choice of clothes; a toothbrush can be frustrated that it is always used the same number of times; a toaster can become aware that they have been left on too long and try to attract attention that the toast is burning, etc. This can be used to add comedy, something that is sorely missing from some Physical Theatre performances.

Remind the students that the morning ‘routine’ must reflect the experience of an OCD sufferer. Run these scenes for the rest of the group to watch and ask for comments about how they can be improved. This can be done more positively using the ‘accept’, ‘build’ or ‘challenge’ comments, so *accept* is perfectly happy with representation, *build* is offer a comment on how a particular moment could be developed or improved, or *challenge*, which should only be used if a spectator believes that something in a scene is actually wrong/not in keeping with the piece’s style or demands. So if there is something in the scene which does not correspond with the actions of an OCD sufferer, it should be challenged. There are many useful formats for bringing this system into the classroom which can be downloaded. I use circles which are spilt into 3 equal spaced thirds – coloured red, orange and green, so at the end of a scene the audience applaud and then hold up their circles with their preferred response at the top – the performers can then see how the audience feels about the scene in the majority. It should be stressed that, if a spectator has a build or challenge colour at the top, they then need to raise that point and explain why.

#### Homework

Revision research into the Chorus in Greek tragedy.

## Lesson 4: Building the journey and developing story telling techniques

### Learning objectives

- ▶ Use of direct audience address
- ▶ Berkoff’s physical life of the text
- ▶ Working as an ensemble
- ▶ Use of exposition
- ▶ Approaches to scripting dialogue.

### Review current work (10 mins)

Allow students the start of the lesson to polish pieces so far and to time them. Remind them to include role swapping and that this needs to be clear. Pieces should be approximately 4 and a half minutes. The piece should currently finish with the knocking on the door of the OCD sufferer by the role-swapped escapee from scene one.

### Greek chorus

Explain that the style of performance is going to change and the whole group are going to act as a Greek tragic chorus to communicate the next stage in the plot and the journey upstairs. The next scene will be done using direct audience address; it will need scripting and will be delivered chorically. This does not

mean every line spoken in chorus, but all actors are onstage and are directly involved. The groups are going to take responsibility for scripting a twelve line choric ode which provides exposition for the audience and then describes the two characters' journey up to the third floor. The ode must include the following:

- ▶ A brief explanation of why character A fled from the ground floor flat, with reference to their phobia
- ▶ Brief details of the journey to Level 2
- ▶ The importance of routine and ritual to character B on Level 2
- ▶ Character A's explanation of the impending danger from below and how they convinced character B to journey upwards with them
- ▶ The electrics are out so there is no lift.

For example:

*In the city centre, stands a concrete block  
Home to a few who fear the world outside  
Our first tenant, woken by threatening sounds  
Bolts will not hold, bars on windows will break  
An escape is made, to safety above  
Through vents and walls, tunnels and shafts  
Til a desperate meeting with the inhabitant upstairs  
One who is dominated by order and routine  
Two join forces to escape the threat below  
Both driven by a fear of loss of control  
But now, nowhere to run or hide  
Through a window, to escape outside.*

Give the students the example choric ode, emphasising the rhyming couplet at the end. Ask them to write their own choric exposition moment and bring their own speech physically and vocally to life, as a Greek chorus. Explain that the next stage of the journey must take place outside of the building, and involves a journey through a window, along a thin ledge, and then a rope climb to the next level above which culminates in breaking a window and escaping inside. Allow students the rest of the lesson to write the choric ode and then rehearse the physical, mimed journey up to Level 3. The choric ode should last ninety seconds and the mimed journey afterwards should be at least sixty seconds. They now have up to seven minutes of devised work.

In future lessons, we have developed the tower block so that the next levels reflect particular theatrical styles. Our next level was influenced by their work on Grotowski and the next character was influenced by acousticaphobia (fear of noise). This is an extremely useful phobia and forced them to work in a very quiet way.

Next, the fifth level, where we used stairs and encountered twins who suffered from clinophobia (fear of sleep). The creation of this relationship and interaction with arrivals was influenced by Frantic Assembly.

The final journey to the top of the block must demonstrate the influence of all the practitioners so far demonstrated, leading to a final journey and arrival at the top in the now working lift, stairs, climbing, crawling, pairs and ensemble work. We arrived to look over the edge and see a peaceful surrounding world, no riots or violence having occurred at all, just a sign in the centre of the roof top that said 'The greatest fear is fear itself'.

### Homework

Learn lines from choric ode.