

Approaching live theatre productions

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A level

A level – AQA Drama and Theatre Section C

Introduction

The aim of this scheme of work is to prepare students to answer any of the questions that appear in the AQA A level Drama and Theatre written paper Section C. It is a 5-point plan designed to enable students to develop their analytical skills and use of subject specific terminology.

Section C focuses on performance and design questions relating to one production seen, whether live or streamed/digital theatre. Students have a choice of 4 questions and, so far, the new specification has split them into two acting and two design specific. Questions are marked out of 25 and I am advising my students to spend just under an hour on this section of the paper.

The mark scheme breaks the marks down into 20 for AO4 (analysis and evaluation) and 5 for AO3 (knowledge and understanding of form, style, aims, creation of meaning and interpretation). While that seems like a lot to cover for just 5 marks, it does clearly show that detailed and consistent analysis and evaluation (what was good and why in the context of the question) is the central focus of each question. Students must evaluate the production as they go along.

This scheme of work will use the example of the production of *The Woman in Black* for an acting question, but all points raised are applicable to any live or streamed production seen, regardless of genre.

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Planning stage 1: Pre-production planning during lessons

Controversially, I don't do any pre-production planning with the students regarding the actual play we are going to see. It's important that the students know what they should be looking for, but not the actual plot. Reading reviews can be useful, but I try to avoid anything that will give away aspects of the show itself. However, I do recommend:

- a) Getting hold of the script of the production in advance. A copy for each student is extremely useful in planning for acting related questions.
- b) Getting students to work through the following list in advance of the performance and consider the basics of what each term means in terms of live theatre production analysis:
 - ▶ **Genre** – can be more than one
 - ▶ **Style** – again, can be more than one, and this needs to be applied to the acting and design of the show
 - ▶ **Production aims** – what effects are the creative team trying to achieve? Audience responses? Something they want the audience to recognise or understand? Themes? Issues? A political or social statement? An atmosphere?
 - ▶ **Auditorium style?** How can the audience position impact on the way they respond to a performance? Composite or discrete set design?
 - ▶ **Time period?** How can this be successfully communicated? Music? Costume and set design? Specific references within the script? Characterisation and time-period-specific behaviour?
 - ▶ **Design elements:** Lighting, sound, costume and set.

Planning stage 2: The performance itself

- a) Buy a programme: should be obvious and programmes often contain very useful information. The programme for *The Woman in Black* is excellent. I buy one and then photocopy any relevant information for the students.
- b) Get the students to draw the set design at some point in the evening. Make sure they attempt it in 3D. Add to the design the following:
 - ▶ Entrances and exits
 - ▶ Audience position
 - ▶ Important items of furniture and set dressing used
 - ▶ Levels used
 - ▶ Materials evident in the design
 - ▶ Colour palette.

Between seeing the performance and the first lesson of study on it, they should read the play script.

Give them a copy of a Section C from the written A level exam and ask them to read through the questions.

Immediately after the performance, get them to write a list of the most successful moments in the show. These can be as simple as 'The scary bit in the house with the scream at the door' for *The Woman in Black*.

Planning stage 3: The first lesson after the performance

Class activity 1

Start with an example question on the board. I start with a performance-related one.

Briefly explain how one or more performers used their performance skills in order to create emotions *in the audience*. Analyse and evaluate how the creation of emotion in the audience contributed to the total dramatic effectiveness of the production.

Break the question down for the students: what exactly are they being asked to do here? What are the *command words* of the question?

This question is about how the actors used their performance skills (vocal, physical, interaction, movement around the stage and stage position) in order to make the audience feel a specific emotion, so the *command words* of the question are 'creation of emotion in the audience'.

So, simply, students need to refer in detail to a number of moments in the show where the actors successfully created a specific emotion or emotions in the audience, and what they actually did onstage that was so successful. My tip here is, if an examiner can clearly picture in their mind exactly what happened onstage at that moment clearly, and it is described in a personal and enthusiastic way, it will get marks.

The best current online AQA candidate example essay on LTP acting questions focuses on three specific moments from a production of *Our Country's Good*. This low band 5 essay does then go into specific detail about the acting skills used in those three scenes. I am currently recommending that students aim to cover at least 5 key moments from the production if it is an acting question.

Post-performance discussion

Breaking the production down in preparation for revision notes, on the board write the key information needed for an essay on LTP in paragraph 1:

- ▶ Title
- ▶ Date seen
- ▶ Venue
- ▶ Live, streamed or digital theatre
- ▶ Director and/or company name
- ▶ One aim that production successfully achieved.

I do this for the first production seen; after that one student is randomly chosen by me to put that information up before the class starts and email it to all the other students in the group. The final bullet point is a method to get the discussion started. The lesson starts with a brief discussion of the final bullet point.

Class activity 2

Put two questions on the board: What were the production aims and what were the most significant moments in the production in terms of plot development?

Split the class into groups, and give them one piece of A3 each. On one side of the paper they are to make a list of the production aims. They have 10 minutes to complete as many as possible.

What should they consider?

What is the overall production aim of the performance? Which one is clearest? For *The Woman in Black*, this is to terrify the audience. But there are others, e.g.:

- ▶ To show the audience that with theatrical imagination and skill, a production does not need expensive sets, costume, props and a large cast to be successful
- ▶ To transport the audience to a wide variety of locations
- ▶ To create an atmosphere of dread and fear
- ▶ To show how successful multi-roling can be
- ▶ To create sympathy for the character of Arthur Kipps
- ▶ To create humour as a way of heightening the impact of the more frightening moments that follow
- ▶ To experiment with the performance space and auditorium
- ▶ To show the effectiveness of fairly simple lighting and sound use
- ▶ To make the audience feel that they will be the next victims of the Woman in Black.

This list will help students move on to Activity 2: on the other side of the paper, they should answer which were the 10 most important moments in the production in terms of the development of the plot. This will aid them in deciding which of the key moments in the production they will focus on in their essays on acting. This is where having a copy of the script each becomes invaluable.

Now give the students 15 minutes to decide in their groups which 10 moments they felt were the most significant in the show in terms of the plot development. It doesn't matter if there is a wide range of suggestions, as there will be at least two moments in the show where they agree. In terms of *The Woman in Black*, students always cite either the first appearance of the ghost at the funeral or the moment when Young Arthur Kipps leaps from the stage and races around the auditorium to rescue the dog from the clutches of the ghost and the sinking mud of the marsh. While it is debatable whether these are classic examples of plot development, they both have a genuine emotional power and are therefore directly related to the initial exam question on the board and its *command words*.

It will be the responsibility of the students to build up a set of notes for each show seen during the course, so it is important to structure the first set for them. It may also be (hopefully) that some of the most significant moments that they list include ones with a significant design element (this is certainly true for *The Woman in Black*).

Class activity 3

Creating an opening paragraph and a relevant key moment in class.

Students will now need to consider which aspects need covering in a key moment to hit the AO3 and AO4 marks on the mark scheme and the importance of showing an understanding of the context of the production and the moment they have chosen to discuss. They need to structure carefully an opening paragraph first. An opening paragraph for an LTP essay needs to be enthusiastic, personal and focussed on the demands of the question (those **command words** again). For example:

The live production of The Woman in Black that I saw at the Fortune Theatre on 27 October 2017 (necessary show info) had extremely effective moments when the actors successfully created emotions in the audience (production now relevant to command words of question). Robin Herford's (director) outstanding production used naturalistic acting, multi-roling and mime (acting styles covered) to powerfully bring to life (assessment) the story of a vengeful ghost and her victims in a way that consistently created moments of genuine terror and fear for the audience, as well as some finely timed comedy (assessment and command words of question covered as well as brief context of the production). I will be discussing Robert Demeger, who played Arthur Kipps, an elderly man so traumatised by the events that he had approached an actor to help him tell the story to finally be rid of its influence over him (actor to be discussed identified, character played stated and brief character sketch) as his acting consistently impressed me by creating a wide range of emotions in the audience (assessment and personal, enthusiastic response).

I recommend to students that they always cover more than one actor in an acting question if relevant, so a secondary actor, character and brief sketch can be added to the opening paragraph (O.P.).

Give students a copy of a successful opening paragraph for their first show seen and break it down for them in terms of the necessary information to cover. This is something they can learn for the exam and just tweak to the *command words* of the question.

Class activity 4

This lesson looks at structuring a key moment for an acting question on creating an emotional response in the audience. Back in their groups, students choose one common key moment of plot development from each list and you then place the following criteria on the board.

- 1) Context of key moment
- 2) Purpose of this moment – aim
- 3) Acting style used
- 4) Initial stage position
- 5) Key quotes from the scene – vocal delivery
- 6) Key physical skills used
- 7) Changes in stage position and movement
- 8) Interaction with other characters on stage and/or audience
- 9) Personal response and assessment

This list will cover the Context (C), Aim (Aim), Detail (D) and Assessment (A) necessary to hit the AO3 and AO4 parts of the mark scheme. It should be stressed though, that the assessment must be consistent throughout a key moment. Go through each point on the list carefully with the class; I use these as building blocks of LTP key moments. Also, emphasise strongly that the key moment they have chosen must directly relate to the *command words* of the question. Is it clearly about the creation of emotion in the audience? The first appearance of the Woman in Black during the production is designed specifically to make the audience jump in terror. This is an excellent example for this kind of question:

- 1) **Context of key moment**
'Stuart Fox, playing the role of Young Arthur Kipps, encountered the terrifying ghost of the Woman in Black when attending the funeral of the Woman's sister, Alice Drablow.'
- 2) **Aims**
 - ▶ 'To successfully shock and disturb the audience and convey Kipps' horror and fear at seeing her terrifying face and malevolent facial expression for the first time through Fox's acting.
 - ▶ To use simple but effective sound design to convey the setting of the funeral, the church, and hint at the threatening character of the Woman in Black.
 - ▶ To use mime to show the location of the church and the pews.
 - ▶ To use simple gobo effects on the gauze to emphasise the location of the church and then the graveyard outside.'
- 3) **Acting style used**
'Naturalistic and mime.'
- 4) **Initial stage position**
'Fox entered upstage right and then moved centre stage miming shuffling along the pews of the church.'
- 5) **Key quotes used and vocal delivery**
[This is where it is invaluable for students to have a copy of the script. Vocal delivery to consider tone, pitch, pace, pause, volume, accent, emphasis and inflection (if relevant to the quotes used)]. E.g. 'On the line (quote from script) Fox effectively used a shocked tone, emphasising the words (section of quote) by raising the volume and using an upward inflection.' [Aim for a minimum of three specific vocal skills per quote.]
- 6) **Key physical skills used**
[Students should refer to a range of skills from the following: facial expression, eye contact, stance, body language, gesture, gait and use of physical contact.]
E.g. 'While delivering this line Fox, his face full of fear, made fixed eye contact with the Woman in Black and then performed a double take, his body language suddenly closing as he brought his hands up to his face in terror and shock.'
- 7) **Changes in stage position**
'Fox staggered backwards [reference to gait as well here] upstage centre in horror.'
- 8) **Interaction with other characters onstage**
'He looked across at Demeger, who was multi-roling as Mr Jerome, in shock and then raced towards him open mouthed.'

9) Personal response and assessment

'I found this moment particularly effective as Fox's use of naturalistic acting here completely convinced me of his terror of the woman and I felt terrified of her too. The audience gasped in shock at her appearance and his acting made the impact of these created emotions (command words of question used) all the more powerful.'

The tip is now to put all that detail together into one key moment that is relevant to the demands of the question and focuses on the command words used. However, this list of acting information is not enough to gain high marks on AO4. Therefore, it is vital that students consistently add *evaluative* terms and *personal, enthusiastic responses* throughout the key moment. Terms like *engagingly, consistently, powerfully, effectively and convincingly* should be spread liberally through a key moment and an LTP essay.

Class activity 5

Now back in their groups, get the students to plan out and then write a key moment from their own list on a piece of A3 paper. It must contain the context, aim, detail and assessment of the moment. Once complete, put the moments on the wall and go through each one. Check that all the criteria have been covered and there is a significant amount of assessment and personal response. References to whole audience responses should all be encouraged so that, in an essay of 5 key moments, some will be personal responses, some whole audience and some a mix of the two to create variety in the essay and stop giving the examiner marking fatigue in the face of repetition. A good acting key moment should contain three or four quotes if the question requires reference to acting skills in general. Leave the key moments up on the wall until the next show is seen. Keep the best ones on each show up for the whole year.

Homework

Students should now complete a minimum of eight of their own key moments on acting. It is wise to vary the moments to reflect the input of a range of actors (there is a cast of three in *The Woman in Black*) and also to include moments where at least two actors are working together onstage, interacting in order to create a specific impact on the audience. There will always be two acting related questions to choose from in Section C, but in the past questions have focussed on actor interaction moments or the use of multi-roling. In regard to multi-roling productions, the excellent Splendid Productions touring theatre company are invaluable, as are the DVDs of their performances.

Planning stage 4: Preparing for design questions

The approach to design is the same as acting; students working in groups to produce example key moments. Design questions will focus on lighting, sound, costume and set. LTP design questions can ask students to focus on two design elements. Each lesson after the performance should focus on one design element, and a list of key moments should be created. Go through one as a class to create an example, then get groups to scaffold one using the key criteria below and put it on the wall. Then, for homework, students create their own. Get the students to hand in one of their own for checking and allow the rest of the class access to those examples. I share these via email.

For example:

'Briefly explain how live and/or recorded sound was used to create a location and/or particular atmosphere at particular moments. *Analyse and evaluate* how this use of sound contributed to the total dramatic effectiveness of the production.'

Command words of the question: *Location and/or atmosphere*

Sound design key moment structure (this still follows the CADA approach as used for acting questions):

- 1) Context of key moment
- 2) Purpose of this moment – AIM – this should be the use of the command words. So, location and/or atmosphere created
- 3) What the actual sound effects used were – what exactly did the audience hear?
- 4) Style of sound used
- 5) How was the sound produced? Live? Recorded?

- 6) Direction of the sound – changes to direction during the cue? Panning?
- 7) Volume? Pitch? Rhythm? Pace? Changes to those during the cue.
- 8) Use of specific effects: echo
- 9) Use of music?
- 10) Timing of the cue? Start point? End point? Length of cue? Use of sound to reflect actors' work onstage?
- 11) Personal response and assessment

Costume design key moment structure

- 1) Context of key moment
- 2) Purpose of this moment – AIM – this could be to convey time period, character or just an effect for the audience
- 3) Draw a sketch of the costume and add labels. One side of A4.
- 4) Explain what the costume actually was. List the items worn.
- 5) Style of costume
- 6) Time period
- 7) The cut and fit of the costume (loose, baggy, fitted, revealing, high cut, hemlines, necklines, waistlines, sleeves, length, shape, etc.)
- 8) Colour palette
- 9) Materials and textures
- 10) Condition – to suggest what?
- 11) Accessories: jewellery, shoes, bags, scarves, wigs
- 12) Make-up, mask and hair design
- 13) Changes to the costume during the particular moment? Item removed or added? Torn or changed?
- 14) Personal response and assessment

Lighting design considerations

- 1) Context of key moment
- 2) Purpose of this moment – AIM – again emphasise use of command words here.
- 3) Style of lighting
- 4) Lanterns used
- 5) Area of stage lit
- 6) Start of cue: describe lighting detail and changes throughout the cue: Intensity and changes to it? Colour?
- 7) Gobo? Strobe? Specials?
- 8) Use of smoke?
- 9) End point? Length of cue? Use of lighting to reflect actors' work onstage?
- 10) Personal response and assessment

Set design considerations

- 1) Draw an A4 3D labelled sketch of the set – include entrances/exits, scale and audience position
- 2) Context of set
- 3) What did the set convey to the audience at this particular key moment?
- 4) Auditorium design
- 5) Composite or discrete
- 6) Style of set
- 7) Materials and texture
- 8) Colour palette
- 9) Specific set dressing and furnishings
- 10) Levels? Gauze?
- 11) Use of specific entrances and exits
- 12) Personal response and evaluation.

Planning stage 5

Students do a timed essay, in class, with their notes available on all areas. Two weeks later, do another one but do not allow notes.

RESOURCES

LTP quick planner

MUST WRITE IN THE PAST TENSE.

SKILL DESCRIPTION – NOT PLOT RETELLING. E.g. *don't* write: 'Wilton, as Kipps, came on onstage and showed us effectively that he was really scared and not confident as an actor. He came on from sr and walked to cs. He then took out his manuscript and held it, his hands shaking. He then opened it and tried to read it and, as he was so frightened, he couldn't and his voice was very nervous and he constantly looked around the audience in terror. This was very effective as it showed how nervous he was in this situation and I felt really sympathetic towards him.' NO!

- 1) O.P.: Live, streamed or digital? Date, venue, director/company, title.
 - a) Personal, enthusiastic justification for choice of show
 - b) Reference to command words of the question
 - c) If design question, name of lighting, sound, costume or set designer
 - d) Very brief summary of plot and production aims
- 2) KM1: Command words of question – personal, enthusiastic response – then CADA.
 - a) Context and command words and personal response/evaluation
 - b) Aim evaluated and bolted on
 - c) Quick description of character first time mentioned
 - d) Acting style used if a performance question
 - e) Detail and assessment continuously
 - f) Reference to personal response and/or audience response
 - g) Aim for 3 to 5 quotes for acting questions
- 3) As KM1 – through to KM5.
- 4) Conclusion – reference to command words and total dramatic effectiveness of the production.