**Introduction**

This scheme of work for use with KSS looks at introducing the play *Yerma*, focusing on key themes in the play, and building acting and directing strategies for Act 1, scene 1.

*Yerma* is a tragedy and clearly reflects Lorca’s interest in challenging the expectations of naturalistic theatre. The performing style adopted should reflect these aspects clearly; so should the technical elements and colour palette for the costumes, as should the terms used to describe approaches to it in written work. There is also a clear element of surrealist influence over the play, and the language is deeply poetic, symbolic and full of imagery. Song and choreographed movement also play central roles in bringing the play to life. Even those scenes which seem the most potentially naturalistic are full of stage directions and poetic imagery which indicate a heightened, almost stylised, acting style.

*Yerma* premiered in 1934 and in it, once again, Lorca took the local and specific and gave them a universal quality, allowing the play to become an indictment of the trappings of social convention, ideas that run through all of his work. At the centre of the play is a woman driven to madness and murder by her desire for a child, in order that she can fulfil that which is expected of her. The play hints at her not being responsible for the lack of a child, but that it is, in fact, her husband Juan who is infertile. The last line of the play ‘I’ve murdered my child,’ as Yerma stands over her husband, who she has just strangled with a strength born from hysteria and despair (or perhaps could the scene be staged so that Juan allows her to kill him?), emphasises the constant symbolic nature of the actions and words. It is her husband whom she has killed, and yet, so consumed is she by her sense of being incomplete, the murder is of her role as a mother: her rightful role which has been denied her.

*Yerma* is perhaps the most immediately accessible of Lorca’s plays, but it has many challenges, especially with regard to focusing on an extract of it when considering the role of a director and an actor. Central to success in dealing with an extract is an appreciation of the heightened acting style which emphasises the poetic nature of the language and the conflicting passions that the characters face. The aim of this scheme of work is to remind students of the need for appropriate theatrical vocabulary, to highlight the importance of the acting style, to understand and begin to convey the subtext evident in the relationships and to highlight some central themes of the play and to consider how they could be made evident during the opening sections of Act 1. The three sections of the opening scene, between Yerma and her husband Juan, then the interaction between Yerma and her newly-pregnant friend Maria, and then finally her scene with Victor, will be considered from the point of view of a director, and simple methods to convey meaning to the audience will be addressed. Students must show an understanding of what their given extract foreshadows later in the play, so that their directorial ideas are relevant and are apt for the development of the plot.

*Yerma* is a highly atmospheric play, and that sense of tension and how it differs in each section of the opening scene of the play, needs to be carefully addressed. Once again Lorca chooses to set his action in a close-knit, highly ordered community, where social roles are clearly defined and must not be deviated from, so *Yerma* as a character becomes a symbol herself of the misery that such a strict sense of social expectation can cause.

**Potential considerations regarding the proposed new specification**

*Yerma* is expected to be part of the ‘List B’ plays for the new AQA A level specification and therefore students will be expected to approach it from a directorial point of view, as well as that of actor and technician. There will be two questions focusing on a specific extract from the play, and this scheme of work...
will begin to prepare students for that section of the new exam. The specification refers once again in this section to the ability of the students to create meaning for an audience through their practical ideas, so once again quotations from the extract and practical ideas to bring them to life for the audience will be central to students' success. The extracts currently offered by AQA as examples appear to be about 100 lines of the play in length, with a compulsory director question first and then a choice of either performer or technician question.

There is a very positive change in the specification's focus in the directing questions, with students now being given a definite purpose behind their directorial intentions, rather than the open ended interpretation currently being used for the A2 AQA Drama and Theatre Studies exam. Current exemplar material available on the AQA website asks students to consider how they would direct the extract to ‘demonstrate Yerma’s growing desperation’ and the second question asks students to perform Maria in order to gain their intended audience response or to consider technical and costume elements that would create a suitable atmosphere for the extract. This apparent mix of AS and A2 style questions does appear to build on the best aspects of the previous specification and avoids the wider directorial focus of previous approaches to extracts that some students have found so challenging. There are 15 marks for the director question and 10 for the secondary performer/technician choice.

The new specification mark schemes focus on the following to achieve top band marks in this part of the exam. Students are expected to:

- Be assured and perceptive.
- Demonstrate assured knowledge and perceptive understanding of the theatrical processes, practices and techniques involved in interpreting and performing theatre.
- Be highly creative in their directorial responses to the printed extract that are completely consonant with the play as a whole – so a clear understanding of the context of the extract is vital again and should be part of the opening paragraph of an exam essay.
- Suggest very detailed strategies for conveying meaning to an audience, offering a coherent interpretation of the extract that has the potential to be highly effective.
- Be discriminating in their references to the text and/or with sketches and diagrams that are entirely appropriate to the set task – so the set sketch remains from the previous specification.
- Be purposeful in their reference to the social or cultural or historical context of the text. So it is not enough to just suggest period and culturally appropriate costumes for the characters, but there must be clear suggestions as to how those justified costume ideas actually contribute to conveying meaning, meaning that is directly related to the directorial intention stated in the question: Yerma's growing desperation. So they need to consider condition of costume, colour, how Yerma wears it, etc. All of these directorial considerations become vital. It is not enough to just show it is set in rural Spain in the 1930s.

As before, ideas used to bring quotations to life must be fully justified and expressed using the correct terminology. Reminding students of that terminology is an excellent way to start Lesson 1 on Yerma. As is an introduction to symbolism - the word 'yerma' means barren.

Lesson 1

Activity 1: Reminding students of key theatrical terms and a basic guide to symbolism.

This lesson is based on the assumption that the students have already had copies of Yerma and have read, but not yet done any class work on, the play. They have also been asked to find a definition of the term 'symbolism' as a preparatory homework.

Ask students to write down as many terms as possible that they associate with the theatre. Focus at this stage on quantity rather than quality and ask them to aim for at least 15. Give them five minutes to actually write them down. Count upwards to see who has the most but do not get them to read them out yet. These can be any theatrical terms, so script, stage, audience, etc. are all acceptable and should be encouraged. It can be worthwhile to put a few basic terms on the board before starting the exercise to encourage all levels of ability.

Then ask students to pair up and see if they can come up with at least thirty
terms between them in 3 minutes, as this time they are hopefully just adding
their own lists together. After three minutes change the focus of the exercise and
ask them to now narrow down their list to the most important ten terms in their
opinion, but important for a director. Now narrow down again to five terms, then
three. Put the top threes on the board and discuss students’ thoughts on why they
have chosen them. Hopefully somewhere in there will be the word ‘script’ or ‘text.’
Quickly mind map the following terms to remind students of the kind of practical
terminology they should be using:

- Vocal skills – I refer to these as V – tone, volume, pitch, pace, pause, accent,
  emphasis, inflection
- Physical skills – P skills – facial expression (emotional or physical), eye contact,
  stance, gesture, body language, physical contact, gait
- Movement/Stage position – M/S.P – upstage, downstage, stage right, etc.
  and why
- Relationships – R x 2 – X2 because of the need to consider relationships with
  the other characters onstage and the audience.

Putting all these terms on a sheet for the students and then having them up
in the room is vital as this is the starting point for making sure that they are
using sophisticated theatrical terminology. Ask them to translate the following
sentences into exam-friendly terms:

1. Juan will run on quickly from the left side looking really angry.
2. Yerma will put her hands on her stomach and look really distressed and then
   sit on a chair on the right with a big sigh.
3. Maria shows she is really happy by using her face and when she says ‘it’s
   happened!’
4. Yerma and Victor will look at each other for a bit too long and from this the
   audience will realise that they have strong feelings for each other that they
   have to keep hidden because she is married to someone else.

So, those examples can become

1. Juan will enter from stage left at a fast pace, facial expression full of anger,
   fists and jaw clenched.
2. Yerma will gesture to her stomach, slowly running her hands over it, chin
   quivering as she holds back tears, then very slowly moves stage right and
   exhales slowly with deep sadness as she sinks into a chair, stance hunched
   and shoulders down.
3. Maria will convey her happiness with a facial expression of joy, smiling
   broadly and will say ‘it’s happened’ in a tone of delight, pitch and volume
   rising to reflect this.
4. Yerma and Victor will maintain fixed eye contact with each other, holding
   it longer than they should, but saying nothing and then looking sadly away,
   conveying a subtext of deep feelings for each other that they cannot show.

These examples can all be added to and adapted, especially if students are given
a specific directorial purpose. The use of individual lines from a scene for students
to add theatrical terminology to convey meaning is an excellent homework to
go alongside the reading of a scene in preparation for a lesson on it. This is an
exercise I use often as it immediately places students in the role of the director,
and means that they make the connection between the skills used in V, P, M/S.P
and R x 2 work as they read through the play on their own.

**Activity 2: Act 1, scene 1, approaches as a director**

This part of the lesson focuses on the initial stage directions of Act 1, scene 1 and
the technical challenges of the dream.

Remind students that they will be expected to focus on an extract from the
play of approximately 100 lines. Ask one student to read out the stage directions
that start the play and think about how they would stage just that brief opening
section. Focus on the following questions and have these ready for the students
to read.

1. What is a strange dreamlike light?
2. How could that be created and what colours would be involved?
3. What other technical elements could be added to the lighting here to
   emphasise the ‘dreamlike’ quality required? Smoke? Projections?
4. What sound effects are required in this section? How should they be
   best created? What style or sound effects would be used? What other
   considerations are there for the sound design here?
5. What is Yerma’s stage position at the start of this scene?
6. Why does the shepherd enter on tiptoe, his eyes fixed on Yerma? For those students who have already read the play, who should play that shepherd and why? Should it be the actor also playing Victor? Or Juan? Why?
7. Who is the small boy? Why is he dressed in white? Would any other costume or make up elements be needed in this section to emphasise the dreamlike quality?
8. What is the significance of the clock chiming? How should that be done? It is important to stress that the clock chime does not wake Yerma.
9. Where will the shepherd exit? How? Does he lead the small boy off with him? Does he briefly wait behind, staring at Yerma with fixed eye contact and a specific facial expression? Why?
10. How does the lighting change to the ‘joyful’ spring morning? What colours are required there and how will that change in atmosphere be achieved? Over how long?
11. What meaning is created for the audience by this brief scene at the start of the play?

Ask the students for their definitions of symbolism and then discuss their answers to these questions, emphasising the style, atmosphere and symbolism of the section in the stage directions. Draw a simple stage plan on the board in three dimensions and ask them for their suggestions of where to place Yerma first and then what she is sleeping on, hopefully placing her centre stage to allow the audience to make the connections needed between Yerma, the boy and the shepherd. Anchor the discussion down to their thoughts about question 11. Is this Yerma’s dream? What is she specifically dreaming of? What is the subtext of this scene? What would be the impact of having the actor playing Victor in this scene play the shepherd later, when Victor visits Yerma for the first time in the play? How will that decision help the audience to understand the nature of their relationship?

Place the students in small groups and ask them to prepare a short written presentation detailing their ideas on how to direct the initial stage directions and the song that immediately follows it at the start of Act 1, scene 1, but give them the specific directorial focus that the audience should clearly understand that this is a physical representation on stage of Yerma’s dream. Run through the presentations and ask students to agree, build on or challenge ideas given.

Lesson 2: Directing the actors in Act 1, scene 1 and introducing symbolism through costume

Activity 1: Symbolic colour and emotion

Write the following terms on the board and ask students to consider a symbolic lighting colour that could be used to communicate them to an audience. Keep them very simplistic at this stage, so green for jealousy is acceptable.

- Jealousy
- Isolation
- Desire
- Rage

Again, ask students to discuss ideas and then either agree, build or challenge the ideas of others. Relate this briefly to the character of Yerma. At this early stage in the play, what is it that she wants most of all? How high on the emotional scale is her desire for a child at the start of Act 1, scene 1, and how can that be communicated to the audience in comparison with her emotional range in Act 3, scene 2? It is vital that students give themselves the opportunity to show the development of Yerma’s emotional journey to show an understanding of the context of the extracts that they will face, hence the need to show some kind of love between Yerma and Juan at the start of the play. How can her longing for a child here be emphasised, and her longing for a child with Juan so she can fulfil the social expectation placed on her? It is useful to keep a sheet of themes on the drama room wall which can be added to and ticked against when they appear in the play for the first time or are emphasised again. The themes of infertility and the pressure of social expectation will begin to become central to each event in the play.

Ask one student to read through the song at the start of Act 1, scene 1. Briefly discuss who is singing that and where the sound should come from onstage. Is it the voice of the dreamlike shepherd or the child? Is it Maria? Should it be a
recorded song done by Yerma? What will each of these decisions communicate to the audience in terms of meaning?

**Activity 2: Examining the language and style**

Ask two students to read through the first Yerma/Juan exchange, and focus initially on the style of the dialogue. Ask students to compare the way that Juan speaks (short, abrupt sentences) with Yerma’s lines. What kinds of images are contained in Yerma’s speech: references to the glass of milk, the rain on the roof, swimming in the river, the stew?

What kind of words could be used to describe the style of the dialogue here? At this stage I would introduce the concept of ‘poetic’ dialogue and the idea of a ‘heightened’ acting style to reflect that. Clearly the characters do not speak in a naturalistic way. Heightened does not mean melodramatic or exaggerated, but the emotions are slightly more emphasised, the eye contact more pronounced and the physical contact (or lack of it) more strenuous and passionate, so at the end of this section when Yerma embraces Juan, clearly taking the initiative in the relationship emotionally, it is clear to the audience that she is a character who feels things very deeply and at this stage in the play she is desperate to make her marriage work and take on her socially expected role as a mother.

Ask students to run the scenes that they have prepared in pairs, placing the intended directorial focus of each scene on the board so the relevant ideas used can be mind mapped around them. So, for example, for the scene with Maria:

- How is a sense of a mother/daughter relationship created between the two characters?
- How does Maria show her joy and fear at being pregnant so quickly?
- Why is Maria nervous about asking Yerma to sew baby clothes for her? What is the subtext of this line?
- How does Yerma show her joy for Maria?
- How does Yerma also reveal her sadness at this stage in the play?

And for the scene with Victor:

- What is the importance of the stage directions in this scene? How do they contrast with the stage directions in the first section between Yerma and Juan?
- How should Victor differ from Juan in terms of casting detail? In terms of costume? In terms of the way he moves during the scene? Does he in fact move, or not?
- Why is Yerma anguished? Why can she not contain that emotion, or why doesn’t she during the scene with Victor?
- How should Yerma perform the song at the end of Act 1, scene 1? Is it a gentle lullaby to herself?
- What is the importance of the final stage directions as Yerma goes to where Victor has been standing? How will that impact be heightened by your casting decisions for the shepherd during the dream sequence at the start of the play? What is the subtext of her deep breath, and then her sudden decision to start sewing with her eyes fixed on a specific point? What could that point be?

**Homework**

Ask students to consider a representational set design that would give an indication of the Spanish setting and location, but could have a single symbolic image projected on the cyclorama that could be changed or adapted during the course of the play to emphasise a thematic or subtextual aspect. For example, the idea of a tree in flower that gradually loses its foliage and begins to wither and die. How could this aspect of set design be used to convey the theme of infertility in the play and at what specific moments could it be adjusted to heighten the importance of that theme? How could the image be added to also reflect the play’s condemnation of such a crushing sense of social expectation? Could the image of the tree become twisted and thorny, encircling the outside of the cyclorama and the characters onstage as well? Does the image of the withered tree become a surreal and symbolic method of communicating Yerma’s own descent into madness?