Practical approaches to Berkoff
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A level

Introduction
I was first introduced to the work of Steven Berkoff at A level and I had never come across anything like it before. I was cast in a production of Metamorphosis and I totally fell in love. His style of theatre is both energetic and mesmerising and I believe that introducing students to his work really helps them to develop interesting pieces of theatre and take a more detailed and dynamic approach to their work.

This scheme delves into practical approaches to teaching Berkoff’s work and aims to encourage students to be more physically expressive by pushing work into new and exciting realms in order for them to explore and enjoy creating theatre that is challenging physically, as well as more expressive and hard-hitting. Some script extracts are used and also suggestions of how to apply Berkoff’s style to devised or re-interpreted work. Berkoff creates theatre that is innovative and detailed, which is something to which I think A level students should aspire. His approaches to mime, chorus work and script writing will, I hope, inspire students to include beautifully detailed work on stage and have great fun in the process.

Learning objectives
Students will gain the following knowledge/skills during the 6 lessons:

- An introduction to a physical style of theatre to help them approach text work more creatively and be inspired to develop interesting devised pieces
- An understanding of mime, chorus and bodies as objects and how this has influenced Berkoff’s work
- An exploration of three of Berkoff’s most popular texts
- How to use their bodies confidently to convey story and exaggerated characters to an audience.

Assessment

- A short mock piece – based on the ‘Re-interpretation’ Component 1 of Eduqas Drama and Theatre A level
- Performance activities – peer and self-assessment.

Lesson overview
Lesson 1
The physical language of the stage: an introduction to ‘physical theatre’.

Lesson 2
Mime: an exploration of mime and the influence of Jacques Le Coq on Berkoff’s theatrical style.

Lesson 3
Chorus work: a look at Greek chorus and how this has influenced Berkoff’s work.

Lessons 4 and 5
Text work: an introduction to Metamorphosis and East.

Lesson 6
Creating devised work: how to use Berkoff’s style to create interesting and varied physical devised work.

Extension work is also outlined at the end of this scheme:

Lessons 7 and 8
How to apply theory to practice: approaching Component 1 of the Eduqas A level.
Lesson 1: An introduction to ‘physical theatre’

Before you start this scheme, set your students some research homework on Steven Berkoff. You could give them the following headings and ask them to present their findings in the first lesson:

1. Where and when was Steven Berkoff born?
2. Where did he train as a young actor?
3. By whom is Berkoff influenced? (Which other theatre practitioners have helped to define his style?)
4. By what artistic theatrical movements has Berkoff also been inspired?
5. In 1968 Berkoff formed a theatrical group: what was it called and what style of work started to evolve?
6. To what extent is Berkoff’s work political?
7. Describe the style of Berkoff’s theatre.
8. How does Berkoff creatively use set (or a lack thereof) in his work?

Task 1

Put on a rousing piece of music. I like to use something like the theme to Chariots of Fire here, as it suits a running race and the pace is quite slow.

Ask students to line up at one end of your working space. They are sprinters who are going to ‘run’ a 100m race. This must all be done in slow motion. They are going to focus on their use of facial expressions, body language and how they interact with the other competitors. Give them 1 minute to ‘warm up’ and get into their starting blocks. This must all take place in slow motion. Encourage the development of larger-than-life characters while they do this. They can ‘eye-ball’ other competitors, be aggressive, be cocky, whatever they like, but these characters must be exaggerated. Once they are on their starting blocks, cue them to start ‘racing’. They can add in some comedy here by tripping others up, reaching over to block the face of the person next to them, fall, roll, etc. Encourage them to try out lots of funny moments here. Remind them to really show off their character and contort their faces to show the struggle of ‘running’. The winner is the one who can cross the line in one piece.

Task 2

Change the music. This time play ‘Money, Money, Money’ by Abba.

They are going to do the race again, but this time their characters are arrogant bankers. They are racing in suits. Mime putting jackets on, adding expensive watches, combing their hair, etc. They are racing towards a large cash bonus. Each of them thinks they deserve the bonus more than the others. They are still going to start in the blocks and run a race, but this time they are adding a different character to this mimed sequence. Start the race. Again they can play dirty tricks on the other competitors – trip them up, pull their shoes off, grab their jackets, spray bank notes everywhere to show their arrogance. The person who ‘wins’ is the one who gets to the cash bonus first.

Task 1 and Task 2 were essentially the same exercise, but by changing the music and adding in different characters in Task 2, ask students what this communicated to the audience? Berkoff’s work is challenging. He likes to question society and the roles people hold in it. What other circumstances could you fit into this warm-up?

Discussion: Berkoff’s style of theatre is not naturalistic. He famously said ‘naturalism is what you do when you don’t know anything else’. Why do you think Berkoff uses mime, chorus work and an exaggerated physical style in his theatre? What is he trying to achieve?

Introduce the students to the scheme. Berkoff’s work is physical and larger-than-life. They must push their work to include big physically-based characters in order to capture the style. Their work must be detailed and at times it can also be grotesque.

Kerry Frampton, the wonderful artistic director of Splendid Theatre, described the work of Berkoff brilliantly to my students in a workshop a few years ago – she said to imagine life as a rock. The rock is smooth and nice to look at. It’s how we present ourselves to the world. But lift the rock and what do you find underneath it? Bugs, mud, creepy crawlies that are there all the time, but we try to cover it up. If you want to capture Berkoff’s work – lift the rock. He shows his audiences the underbelly of society, the nasty, gritty, grimy side to life that always exists, but we try to cover it up with the rock. I think this is a great analogy that helps students to understand that Berkoff’s work is perhaps more hard-hitting and provocative than other forms of physical theatre.
Task 3: Bodies as objects
Ask students to walk around the room. Call out a series of objects and ask students to manipulate their bodies into the object you’ve described. Start with easy things such as a chair, a banana, a desk. Then build up to more difficult things.
Then ask them to find a partner. Give them one minute to create three household objects as a pair using their bodies.
Put pairs into groups of 4. Give the group 3 minutes to create a moving animal (with sounds), a mode of transport (with movement) and an iconic building.
Ask them to try to transition smoothly from one object to the next. Watch these performances and give feedback on how they were using their bodies to create recognisable shapes.

Task 4: Morning routine
In groups of 5–6, assign one student to be the central character. The others in the group are going to create the objects around him/her as they move about their daily morning routine. They must show the character waking up and going about their daily habits – shower, shave/put make-up on, dress, eat breakfast. Leave for work. The members of the group form the objects the character uses around them. Ask them to add in sounds as well. Now ask them to add in a little bit of personality to their objects. The objects could even speak here: ‘Morning John. Looking FINE today’ (as the mirror), for example.
Now add in a twist. One group is going to present a super-successful, rich, suave character. Life is going really well for this person. Mornings are a dream. They live in a penthouse apartment, they have an espresso machine, a jet shower, fluffy bathrobes, underfloor heating, etc. Life is great.
The other group is going to present an unlucky, downtrodden character. They live in a dingy flat. Their alarm clock is not reliable, so they’re often late. The hot water is not working, the door handle comes off in their hand, their shirt is creased and worn, their toaster is broken. Life is not going well.
Assign each group one scenario. They will create the morning routine for either the successful or unsuccessful character.
Give them time to rehearse, try out different ways of presenting the objects and getting the character to interact with them. Encourage working as an ensemble to create and develop objects, then dissolve them into other creations. They can also present walls, doors, corridors as the character moves through the space. They must include sound effects. The central character can also make sounds or add in some short dialogue. Objects could even turn and say something to the audience.
Present these to the rest of the group. How has creating the set and physical objects around the character brought the scene to life? What are the differences between the way in which the suave successful character’s objects behaved in comparison to the unsuccessful character’s?

Discussion
- Why do you think Steven Berkoff uses a physical style of theatre?
- How does creating your own set/objects develop a sense of complicity within the group you are working with on stage?
- How could you define Berkoff’s style?

Lesson 2: Mime
Mime is a very important aspect of Berkoff’s work. Students need to think about how to use mime effectively in order to help capture his style. Discuss the homework. How was Berkoff influenced by the work of Jacques Le Coq?
Play the following video clip. This is from Berkoff’s one-man performance of Edgar Allen Poe’s The Tell-Tale Heart.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WdXZbxgLwkM
Ask them to focus on how Berkoff uses mime in this clip and how he uses sound to go along with it. The most wonderful moment is where he is going down a spiral staircase. How does he use mime to theatrical effect in this piece? How did his work at the Paris mime school influence his stage work and theatrical style?
This is a useful 6 minute clip where Berkoff discusses Parisian mime and his work on Metamorphosis:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KAUuBEzOtxA

Homework
Students are to research the work of Jacques Le Coq and his mime school in Paris.
**Task 1: Basic mime techniques**

In pairs students are to mime pulling a large object on a piece of rope. Model good techniques, such as the placement of their hands, the sense of weight of the object they are pulling, the introduction of sounds here. Think about how to tailor this mime ‘for’ the audience, rather than ‘at’ the audience. Perhaps one character feels very strong or particularly confident about the task, but the other does not.

Then get them to do the same thing with a large box. They cannot lift it. They have to try everything. They can add in sounds here, such as the strain of the person trying to lift the object. Then another character comes along and just effortlessly lifts the box and moves it. This character must look out to the audience and communicate their ease. Perhaps with a wink? Or an eye-roll at the other character? A sigh?

Finally, two characters are surgeons operating on a patient. They can be excellent at the task, or incompetent! They could take out the heart, we could hear it beating, they could add in slurping sounds, perhaps one character starts to feel faint? Get them to experiment with this as much as they like, but each time ask them to include the audience in some way. Act ‘for’ the audience and tailor their mime for effect.

**Task 2**

Hand out Resource 1, an extract from *The Trial – Scene 2, ‘The City’.*

In groups of 6, ask students to act out this section. They must work as a chorus and act out and mime the city, all of the objects described, all the people, and form sounds.

**Task 3**

Hand out Resource 2 – another extract from *The Trial*.

Now to further develop a sense of chorus and to build on last lesson’s bodies as objects, get students to act out Resource 2. They must use mime, physical theatre and act as a chorus to depict K’s room being searched.

If you have time in this lesson, you can move on to discuss some techniques that Jacques Le Coq developed.

**Extension task: Jacques Le Coq’s 7 Levels of Tension**

There is a useful description on a Drama Resource website, based on the work of Simon McBurney:

https://dramaresource.com/seven-levels-of-tension/

Introduce them to the concept of the 7 Levels of Tension’

1. Exhaustion
2. Laid back
3. Neutral – no story
4. Alert – curious
5. Suspense – is there a bomb?
6. Passionate – opera. There is a bomb!
7. Tragic – grief, petrified. The bomb is going to go off!

Get students to experiment with the different levels of tension and create mime that corresponds with it.

They must create a short mimed sequence that explores one of these states of tension, and perform it for the rest of the class. Is it clear what state of tension they are creating? How have they used mime to communicate this?

You can do work with masks at this stage also. Le Coq wanted to show his actors that acting relies on the physicality of the body, not on script. This is similar to Berkoff’s approach.

**Lesson 3: Chorus work**

Chorus work is such an important part of Berkoff’s approach to theatre; it’s important in your lessons to develop this sense of group harmony and work on choral movement.

**Task 1: ‘Chorus of birds’**

This is a great warm-up activity that gets students into the mind-set of working as one.

Ask four students to create a diamond shape (one at the front, one at the back and two on either side). The person at the front is going to start moving slowly. The others must copy them exactly. Try simple movements first, such as moving arms or taking a few paces forwards. They are aiming to move as one. The person at the front can rotate 90 degrees either way, but when they do this, depending on
which way they turn, there will be a new leader, as there will be someone else at
the ‘front’. Think about how to build up the movements to create something more
lyrical, add levels, add varying pace, etc.

Once you have modelled this, group students and get them to spend some
time working on this concept. Although clearly one person is at the ‘front’ all of
the time ‘leading’, their aim is to work so well together that it’s not clear who
the leader is.

Perform some for the rest of the class. Highlight groups that are working well
as an ensemble.

**Discussion:** How did Greek theatre use chorus? What was the role of the Greek
chorus? Does a chorus have to stand together and speak together? What impact
does creating a chorus have on an audience?

The size of a Greek chorus could vary from 15 to 50 people. The purpose
was to convey the main themes and ideas presented in the text and reflect on
the messages given in the play. They would move, dance, speak as one. It was
sometimes believed that the chorus showed how an audience should react.

The National Theatre video on modern approaches to Greek Chorus is
excellent. You can find it here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MlXi8LfKv-0

This might help students contextualise the impact of the chorus and how it
can be used in a more modern context.

**Task 2: The dice players**

Inspiration for this exercise is taken from Berkoff’s The Messiah.

In groups of 6-8 create a chorus of gamblers. They are playing ‘craps’ the
casino game where dice are thrown down a table, with the right numbers landing
winning sums of money. They must include sound, the rattling of the dice, the
intake of breath from the chorus, the landing of the dice, the winning/losing.
Think about how to use facial expressions and mime to act out this throwing
of the dice. Use the experience of the chorus of birds exercise to think about
positioning and movement as a group. Change round who has the dice and who
throws, and play with movement.

Rehearse and perform some of these to the group. How does the use of chorus
create impact for an audience? Why do you think Berkoff uses a chorus in most of
his plays?

**Task 3**

Using Resource 3, act out the opening of The Trial as a chorus. How do the voices
form a chorus? What movement could you add in? Does a chorus have to speak
as one, or could you overlap dialogue? You could divide lines up, experiment with
volume, positioning, etc.

Rehearse and perform these scenes.

**Plenary**

Why do you think a chorus is an important tool in Berkoff’s work? What impact
does it have in a modern context for the contemporary theatre goer?

**Lessons 4 and 5: Text work**

I have allowed two lessons here, as you may want to take more time to polish
sections and spend time watching the televised version of Metamorphosis. If you
are pushed for time, you could get students to watch this at home and split
your class into two, getting one half to focus on Metamorphosis and the other on
East. You can find the televised version on YouTube. The first 4-5 mins can be
found here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VUh2rNDpNk

There is also a nice interview on ‘Meditations on Metamorphosis’ with Steven
Berkoff discussing how he approached the adaption of the text.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YsYAmfH46Ys&list=PLRbLoBLpDg5U99kJX1oGlzVTQBhQwCGzE&index=4

**Task 1: Metamorphosis**

Hand out Resource 4, a script extract from Metamorphosis. Students must act out
this opening and create a clockwork beetle. They must move their arms and legs
to create the outline and structure of Gregor once he has transformed into the
insect.
Task 2
Play the sound of a ticking clock. Hand out Resource 5. In groups of 4–5 (depending on whether you want to include Gregor here), act out the section, using clockwork mimed actions. The actions must be larger-than-life and they must move in time with the clock.
Perform these two sections together.
Watch the opening of the wonderful television version of Metamorphosis with Tim Roth as Gregor and Steven Berkoff as Mr Samsa. Although filmed for television, not the stage, what impression do students get from the video? How is Berkoff’s style captured in this performance? Why do you think that Berkoff wanted to adapt Kafka’s work? What themes are conveyed here?

Task 3: East
Read a section of East by Steven Berkoff. Why do you think he chose to use poetic Shakespearean rhyme and cockney slang in this piece?
Act out scene 12 – the motorbike ride. Create a motorbike with bodies as objects and bring it to life with sounds and movement.

Task 4: The fight
Create a physical sequence for Mike and Les’s fight at the start of the play. Think about how to incorporate lifts, elaborate movements and exaggerated characters. You could expand this to add in a chorus here as well, including the others that Mike and Les reference in their speeches as those who were looking on with their ‘flesh leering jellies’.

Lesson 6: Devised work
Devised work in its various forms creates a great deal of the practical elements of the A level specifications now and students are expected to create and develop imaginative pieces of work inspired by practitioners. I think that Berkoff is an excellent influence on devised work and encourages students to take a fresh approach when creating their own work. It also works well for the new Eduqas A level Component 1 ‘Re-interpretation of text’ as it can help students to look afresh at text work and really redefine the style of the work they create.

Spend this lesson getting students to come up with a few minutes’ worth of material here, inspired by the style of Berkoff.
They must include:
► Chorus work
► Bodies as objects
► Exaggerated characters
► Mime
► Possibly some political or hard-hitting context.

Lessons 7 and 8: Extension work
Thoughts on how to apply theory to practice: approaching Component 1 of the Eduqas A level.
Many of the new specifications at A level are asking students to be more varied with their approach to practical work. Over the past 10 years I have noticed that exam boards are really appreciating how students are now marrying different styles together and developing work that is performed in a completely different style to that in which it was originally written. Theatre companies such as Gecko, Kneehigh, Frantic Assembly, all take physical approaches to their work with less of a reliance on text than ever before.

For Component 1 of the Eduqas A level, students are asked to ‘re-interpret’ a section of text for their first practical assessment. They are required to perform text (30–70 per cent) from a section in a completely different style. I think a Berkoffian approach can work wonderfully well here. It forces the actor to look at the text in a different way; to split up dialogue, create chorus and push themselves to present the action from a different perspective.

Start with short sections of any text familiar to your students (which are in a different, non-physical style) and ask them to keep between 30–70 per cent of the extract, then write in and develop their own chorus dialogue and use the ideas from this scheme to present a 5-10 minute piece inspired by Steven Berkoff. This can be used as a mock approach to this component in the first term of the A level in order to get them used to the idea of how to re-interpret a text.
RESOURCES

(References for all five resources are from the collected edition of *The Trial*, *Metamorphosis*, *In the Penal Colony*, by Steven Berkoff, © 1981, 1988, published by the Amber Lane Press, ISBN 978-0-906399-84-2.)

**Resource 1: Script extract from *The Trial* by Steven Berkoff**


**Resource 2: Second script extract from *The Trial* by Steven Berkoff**

From p. 15 'K: I have certain …' to p. 15 ‘... your underwear’.

**Resource 3: Extract from *The Trial* – Act 1, opening section**

From p. 11 ‘Electronic Bach …’ to p. 12 ‘... through tunnels’.

**Resource 4: Introduction to *Metamorphosis***

From p. 79 'The FAMILY …’ to p. 79 ‘... no dream’.

**Resource 5: Script extract from *Metamorphosis* by Steven Berkoff**

From p. 80 ‘A loud ticking …’ to p. 81 ‘... Clothes!’.