

Creating devised work for practical assessment at GCSE Drama, without using naturalism

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GCSE – AQA Component 2

Introduction

The aim of this scheme of work is to prepare students to create non-naturalistic devised work for the Component 2 unit of the AQA GCSE Drama course. It is a six-activity plan about how to start and create non-naturalistic performance work and how to link certain aspects of the devising log. These lessons are physical and active in their approach. The activities lead to a very symbolic, non-naturalistic short performance which does require students to think ‘outside of the box’.

Activity 1: A practical introduction to thematic/symbolic approaches to communicating information to the audience

Physicalising the text

Start with a game of hangman. Use the word *symbolism*. After students have guessed it, ask them what they think it means. Widen this out to discuss what they think a symbolic piece of theatre may involve. What colour might a jealous character wear in a piece of symbolic theatre? In what colour would they dress a character representing death? If we talk about someone being so good at something they are ‘flying,’ what does that actually mean?

Ask students to sit in a circle on chairs. Tell them that they are going to create a circular object but they are going to build it up one person at a time around the circle. Nominate one student in the circle who is confident to start and will throw themselves into it. Ask them to stand and physically form a tree, but it must be an old gnarly tree with branches going in different directions. The person to their left will then do the same and it will continue around the circle until there is a circle of angled, gnarly trees, hopefully slightly intertwined with each other, forming a reasonably thick, circular forest.

Repeat the exercise going the other way, and now ask the class to give each tree a threatening personality through facial expression and to increase the amount of intertwining that takes place, so the forest becomes more thick and dense. This time, play a piece of music during the creation of the forest that gets louder, aggressive and faster and ask the students to attempt to match the music with their forest creation.

Now, quickly brainstorm stereotypical words or phrases that students associate with being told off by a higher status figure, the more clichéd the better. Write them up on the board.

For example,

- ▶ ‘What do you think you are doing?’
- ▶ ‘What on earth is going on here?’
- ▶ ‘I’m not angry, just disappointed.’
- ▶ ‘You will never amount to anything!’

Repeat the exercise for the third time, and now play a piece of music that has a very regular beat; still keep the threatening and aggressive facial expression for the trees, but now ask them to add one of the phrases on the board and to say them ‘in character’ (aggressive, threatening) as they form their part of the forest and intertwine with the next person in the circle.

Now remove the chairs and ask the students to sit on the floor. Place one student in the centre of the circle also sitting on the floor and ask them to slowly stand as the forest forms around them and then start turning in a circle in time to the music used. Make sure they are turning in different directions to the forest

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circle that is being created. Run this scene a few times with different students placed in the centre.

Now ask the students to imagine they have gone to the theatre and that is the opening scene of the piece. What could the forest *symbolically* represent? What title could they give it? Imagine they are the audience in a theatre, the lights come up and they then see the scene being performed. What information is the scene trying to convey to them? What emotions does the scene provoke in the audience? How do they feel about the character in the centre of the scene? What is their relationship to the 'forest' around them? Who or what might be the 'forest' in their own lives?

Homework

Ask students to go away and find a formal definition of the word 'imprisonment'.

Activity 2: A thematic rather than plot-driven approach

Start by discussing some of the definitions of the word 'imprisonment' and put them up on the board. Make a decision as a class on which one is the clearest and shortest for the audience.

Now put the phrase '*Don't be a prisoner of your own mind*' on the board. Place the students in pairs and ask them to think about what that phrase means? Ask them what kinds of prisons are not built with walls and bars, but are prisons none the less. Get them to come up with five examples. Then, after five minutes, get them to narrow their ideas down to the best two and put those on the board. Hopefully you will have some suggestions including expectations, limitations, prejudice, the views of others, peer groups, society, etc.

Now place students into groups of 4 or 5. Ask them to prepare a short, structured improvisation using the following plan:

1. Start in a line facing the audience. As a chorus, say the word '*Imprisonment*' and then state a clear definition of that word. No movement, vocal and facial expression only. Encourage them to make the definition clear and engaging to listen to.

2. Then add one sentence each when they step forward and add a line of dialogue that describes a personal 'prison' of their own. For example:

- ▶ 'The expectations placed on me to do well at school'
- ▶ 'Having to fit in with what my friends have and wear'
- ▶ 'Training for a job I do not want to do'
- ▶ 'Checking social media for comments and likes'
- ▶ 'Having to look after a younger or older relative'

These can be completely invented for theatrical purposes or based on their own experience. Make sure the sentence is a maximum of ten words long, so it does not matter if it is not a 'full sentence', and ask students to improvise the line so it becomes more conversational and less formal. So, '*The expectations placed on me to do well at school*' could become '*Parents and teachers are crushing me*'. Now add one clear action to that line which they can simply demonstrate, but which should help to bring the line clearly to life; for example a 'crushing' action on the word. This could also be miming putting some information into a mobile phone, miming putting on a tie and 'smartening up', miming typing notes into a laptop, miming cooking and cleaning or a 'crushing' action on the word for the more developed, improvised line. Put the scene together, rehearse and show.

Activity 3: Follow up and refinement

Q and A: What styles of acting are being used during this short scene? Direct audience address? Chorus/ensemble work? Physical theatre? How could this short scene be used in conjunction with 'the forest' scene from the previous lesson? By combining these two, what themes/ideas are being communicated to the audience?

Questions: How could that sense of 'imprisonment' be built up to show to the audience that it is crushing the characters in the scene? What skills/techniques could the actors use during their solo moment to convey how the sense of imprisonment is building or getting worse? Volume? Repetition? Exaggeration of emotion? After each character has performed their solo line, could they all repeat

their lines over the top of each other, getting louder and more desperate, and their actions becoming more exaggerated and frantic, and moving towards the audience down stage?

Developing use of physical skills. Ask students to develop the action they are using during their solo lines so that it becomes a series of four different movements, all still linked to the idea of the personal imprisonment, and perhaps linked to specific words they are saying. Rehearse and polish.

Adding music to the scene? Try adding a piece of music with an increasing pace and beat so that the actions become *synchronised* with the music during the scene and perhaps with each other as well. What does the music add to the scene? What does the sense of synchronisation add to the performance? How does it help to connect the characters onstage thematically and symbolically?

Keeping notes on development and refinement. Ask each group to keep a list of what they have added to the scene in order to improve its impact on the audience. This can be techniques or design elements. For Section 2 of the devising log for Component 2, students are required to discuss how they developed and refined their work and also overcame challenges. They should provide a clear example of a scene that needed adapting and improving and how they did it. This method, of rehearsing something and then thinking about what can be adapted or added, is an excellent example of how to plan ideas for that section of the log.

The importance of imaginative transitions. Ask students to go back and look at the two scenes they have: the creation of the forest and then the chorus into solo examples of imprisonment scene. How can they get from one scene to the other using an imaginative, non-naturalistic transition that continues to highlight the theme of imprisonment to the audience? Brainstorm possible methods of moving on the board, e.g.:

- ▶ Walking in time and in slow motion together as if they are individually being crushed down under a heavy weight?
- ▶ Forming a group and mime walking as if they are chained together by the ankles or wrists?
- ▶ Form 'piggy back' pairs with the person being carried wrapping themselves tightly around their carrier and stage whispering/shouting/chanting phrases about imprisonment from the board created during Activity 2. Again, these could be improvised and developed to become more sinister, emphasised by facial expressions as they are carried. The chanting can be done in a childlike way, almost like a playground chant to make it more non-naturalistic and threatening.
- ▶ Add in three claps or sound effects that mean the actors have to switch to a different form of transition. So, during the transition, first clap, chained at the ankle mime, second clap, piggy back, third clap, slow motion walk being crushed down. On each clap they should change the direction of their movement in the space. During their movement on the third clap, they should then end up in the correct position to start their solo dialogue lines. This means they are emphasising the different kinds of imprisonment they face as they move throughout the scene. Through this, even the transition becomes a non-naturalistic method of conveying themes and ideas to the audience. The piece now never actually stops, and blackouts that deaden the atmosphere and fragment the action can be easily avoided.

Put the whole scene together with the chosen transition. Rehearse, polish and perform. List the styles of acting used in the scenes on the board again.

1. Mime
2. Physical theatre
3. Direct audience address
4. Synchronised movement to music
5. Chorus/ensemble work – vocal and physical
6. Transitions that convey meaning to the audience.

Students are now building up a list of techniques and styles to use in non-naturalistic devised work. Watch and discuss work. Is information being clearly conveyed? Will the audience 'get it?' If not, how can we make it clearer?

Homework

Ask students to research the story of Icarus and find out everything they can about him. Cover one side of A4 with research information found. This activity links straight away to the devising log Section 1. They should also find a piece of instrumental, inspirational music that builds very quickly to a crescendo. It should build over approximately 15 seconds maximum.

Activity 4: Linking the rehearsal process to the devising log in non-naturalistic devised work

Put the title on the board: **Flying too high?**

Start with the list of *performances styles* on the board that they created during the last lesson. Go back through definitions of each style to make sure they are clear.

Ask students quickly to look through their research findings on Icarus. What do they think is the 'symbolic' aspect of the story of Icarus? What is the symbolic nature of the 'wings' and the 'sun?' Is it a very negative story about telling people not to pursue their dreams or warning them that they must always listen to advice and avoid 'flying too high?' What does that term mean to them? Have they ever felt they have been advised to stop doing that? By whom? What examples can they think of when they/other people have been 'flying too high?'

Place the students into new groups, keeping the list of acting styles on the board at the start of the lesson. Give them a devised starter sheet with four inspirational ideas on it. For example:

1. A single word – 'EXPECTATIONS'
2. A single image – one that shows that individuals are more interested in their mobile phone screens than talking to each other. Naturalistic in style (example opposite).
3. An image that shows wings that have been made. This one is vital for the next exercise. A connection to Icarus is very helpful here but the image must be from before his fall (example opposite).
Or 'How can one change oneself,' this is the title of a piece of contemporary art by Ilya and Emilia Kabakov from 2000 which is an excellent example of 'created wings.'
4. A music video that has a symbolic or challenging narrative. The 1998 video directed by Jonathan Glazer for Unkle's 'Rabbit in the Headlights' is a really thought-provoking piece with a narrative highly open to interpretation. It is available on YouTube.

The first section of the devising log requires students to discuss the starting stimulus material with which they were provided, and what their initial responses to them were. They then need to explain which stimulus they chose as the starting point for their piece and why. This can be more than one, so providing them with a range of different types of stimulus material that already have possible links for development is a useful starting point. The fact that they also relate to the short non-naturalistic piece they devised in the previous lesson will also encourage them to approach their new task using similar skills and acting styles.

Activity 5: Structured improvisation inspired by at least one image from the stimulus sheet

In their groups, ask students to improvise and then write up definitions of the following words/phrases inspired by stimulus material 3 from the starter sheet.

- ▶ High flying
- ▶ High flyer
- ▶ Flying too high
- ▶ Flying free.

Make the first one very literal, so 'flying high above the ground' is a good example. Get them to be as imaginative as they can for the other three. Try to get them to think symbolically, so it can be useful to go back to that term and how they described it at the start of these lessons.

Ask the students to now plan and rehearse Scene 1. Use the following criteria:

1. They must start in a line facing the audience
2. One of them then must say 'High flying' and then step forward and deliver the definition of that phrase straight to the audience using direct audience address.
3. Two of them then say the phrase 'High flyer' and then step forward to join number 1. All three will then say the definition of that phrase as a chorus.
4. The rest will then say 'Flying too high' and then will step forwards to join the others when they will as a chorus say the definition of this phrase.



5. Then one in the line will say 'Flying free' while the others sit down, emphasising the importance of the standing individual, but no definition will be said. That will be the end of the scene.
6. Quickly polish the simple scene and show.
7. Q and A. The scene is currently very flat. What can we do to make the scene vocally and visually more interesting for the audience to watch? Brainstorm ideas on the board.

Activity 6: Development and refinement

What would a modern-day retelling of the story of Icarus involve, if we were going to take his 'flight too high' as one that has a symbolic meaning? Ask students to brainstorm ideas about the context of a modern-day Icarus and record those for later lessons. Now, go back to the simple scene we currently have. How can we move away from just delivering a definition into something more theatrical, thought provoking and non-naturalistic?

Adding a tableau, slow motion, mime and music

1. Ask the students to come up with a simple tableau that communicates the idea of 'Flying high'. They can use levels and lifts to communicate the concept of flying and height. It must be one that can easily be created over 5 seconds of transitional movement, so they should move quickly into position but still in a controlled way. All moving on the same leg can instantly give the transition polish. Structure the scene so that again they start in a line, one says the phrase and then while the definition is being said the rest of the cast move out, in time, over 5 seconds into the tableau image. Make sure the tableau is locked on 5 as the definition is finished.
2. Now ask two of them to deliver the line 'High flyer' while still in tableau number 1, and then ask them to move out of that tableau over 5 seconds into a second tableau, but this time it must represent the *symbolic* idea of a high flyer. This time though, they should move in slow motion during the transition. Plan, rehearse and polish.
3. Now ask them to deliver the line 'Flying too high' as a chorus three times, while initially still in position for tableau two, but they should then start to move and continue the delivery of the lines as they transition into the next image. This time though, the transition should be the actual scene as they create a moving image that communicates the concept of *flying too high*. Each time they deliver the line they should become more urgent vocally in conveying the emotion, so the scene becomes more desperate and committed. After exactly 15 seconds they should have completed the image and the delivery of the line three times, so the transitional scene needs to finish on a clear moment of 'flying too high.' This could simply end with one of them falling to the ground.
4. Finally, then ask them to create a final image of one cast member being higher than the rest over 15 seconds. This can be a lift, use of rostra or other cast members being lower onstage. They should take 15 seconds of movement to achieve this and should attempt during that movement to use mime and interaction to show that they are attempting to stop the one character that will end up higher by holding them down or hanging on to them. This should be done in silence, but facial expression, gestures and movement must be highly exaggerated to make it clear to the audience the battle that is going on. The final 5 seconds can be that character freeing themselves from everyone else and then ending up raised above them. Then, at the end, that character should deliver the line 'Flying free' full of triumph and joy directly to the audience. Ask the group to choose one of the pieces of instrumental music and play it during this movement sequence to add dramatic power.
5. Now ask the group to put all the scenes together and polish. Emphasise the importance of exact timings during the transitions and tableau/movements which bring the lines of dialogue to life, but not naturalistically, and there doesn't need to be any sense of connection between scenes at this stage, other than some form of flying. Plan and rehearse.
6. Finally, ask the students to add the forest scene to the start of their performance, but a small group version. They should still do this scene in a circle with one cast member in the middle and at the end of this scene they should move swiftly and smoothly in time into a line to start their performance with the delivery of the first phrase. Their performances should now follow this plan:

- a) Symbolic forest scene – one character in the centre turning the opposite way to the creation of the forest. Lines delivered towards the central character. Scene finishes moving into a line as one.
- b) In a line – deliver the first phrase ‘*High flying*’ and then move in time into a tableau image that clearly shows that idea over 5 seconds.
- c) Deliver the line ‘*High flyer*’ and then move in slow motion over 5 seconds into a second tableau that communicates that idea.
- d) Now moving over *15 seconds* the phrase ‘*Flying too high*’ is repeated *three* times while a transitional scene is shown demonstrating that concept *during the actual transition*. So the scene becomes a moving non-naturalistic one with a symbolic theme. Vocal delivery becoming more urgent and emotional as the scene progresses.
- e) Finally, over *15 seconds*, a mime/movement sequence is shown showing one character’s struggle to break free of the others; they become raised up higher and then finish the scene by triumphantly delivering the line ‘*Flying free*’ straight to the audience. This final sequence will have music played during it to add atmosphere and pace/energy.

In summary

The groups now have a symbolic piece of drama with a central theme of ‘Flight.’ They have used a wide range of different acting styles to communicate ideas and 5 short scenes which can easily be developed further, in non-naturalistic ways or with some naturalistic additions to vary the impact. They have begun to use research, have considered how to develop and refine key scenes, both in keeping with the demands of the devising log and have begun to experiment with levels, physical theatre and music. They also have research notes into the story of Icarus and how to modernise it. They also now have a stimulus sheet with 4 starting points on it to build into their initial plan.