

# From page to stage: A rehearsal toolkit

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GCSE/A level

## Introduction

All the specifications at GCSE and A level demand that students practically study a script for examination. With a large group it is often difficult for the teacher to help all students move their work forward in a rehearsal or lesson, and often students are rehearsing independently of the teacher. Students may not have the experience or knowledge that professional actors and directors bring to the rehearsal process, and this can make practically exploring a text quite challenging. The aim of this scheme is to provide teachers with a toolkit of exercises that students can apply at specific points in the rehearsal process. We have designed the scheme to be flexible so that you can pick and choose exercises that are appropriate to your students and the texts that they are studying.

### Learning objectives

The following exercises are designed to be used with students at GCSE and A level who are studying a scripted text for examination. Students will be able to:

- ▶ Understand the role and responsibilities of the director
- ▶ Understand that a text can be interpreted in many different ways
- ▶ Independently apply rehearsal techniques practically to bring a text to life
- ▶ Analyse their role in the context of the whole play.

## Exploring the world of the play

### Learning objectives

By completing these exercises students will:

- ▶ Have a secure understanding of the whole play they are performing
- ▶ Be able to make informed choices that are rooted in the text of the play
- ▶ Understand the social and historical context of their chosen text and how this informs performance.

### Exercise 1: Facts and questions

Aim: To encourage an active and detailed reading of the script.

One of the first activities that teachers will often ask students to do at the start of rehearsal is to read the play. This often results in a rather surface level understanding, with students often missing important details, especially in the stage directions. A different approach is to give students a specific task to complete as they read through the text.

This exercise is a desk-based activity. Students should read through the script, identifying facts as they arise. For each fact students should identify three questions that they would like answered. For example, if the stage direction stated that the play is set in, 'a house in Luton' the questions might be: What kind of house is this? Who else lives in the house? Is the house owned or rented?

This exercise is about opening up the interpretative possibilities of the script, so it's not important to answer the questions at this stage. One student in the group should take on the additional role of scribe to record the facts and questions, and should summarise the findings at the end of the reading.

### Exercise 2: Geography of the play

Aim: To help students imaginatively visualise the physical world of the play.

This activity invites students to consider the physical world in which the play takes place. They should go through the text as a group and mark down any references to place. You could divide this task among the group, and ask some students to identify the immediate setting, some to identify references to other nearby locations, and some to note any references to the wider world. For example, in Mike Leigh's *Abigail's Party* the immediate setting is Beverly's living room (there are also references to the kitchen, toilet, bedroom and front door).

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Students will gain a deeper understanding of a play if they are fully involved in the reading of it, and not just concentrating on their own role. Ask students to take turns in reading lines, but to make it clear who is speaking they should preface each line by saying the name of the character speaking, for example 'John says ...'.

Nearby locations in this play include: Tony and Angela's house, Sue's house where Abigail's party is taking place, and the hospital where Angela works. The wider world of the play includes Romford, Essex and England.

Using flipchart paper and pens students should map out the physical geography of the play. The immediate setting could be represented as a floor plan, which will help students make staging decisions. Where appropriate it might be useful to indicate the distances between locations and to make note of population sizes.

An extension of this task is to ask students to research images of the locations to display in the rehearsal room alongside their maps.

### Exercise 3: Context

**Aim:** To explore practically the social and historical context of the play.

Helping students to understand context can be challenging. However, one way of approaching this is to begin by exploring the popular music and dance of the period in which the play is set. This may not be useful for every play, but popular dance can be very revealing about the relationship and status between men and women, as well as the social manners of the time. For example, students studying Noel Coward's *Private Lives* might discover a lot about the frivolity and playfulness of the period through dances such as the Charleston. The looser morals of the age are evident from the freer and less structured movement.

## Unlocking the Text

### Learning objectives

By completing these exercises students will:

- ▶ Understand their character's intentions and motivations
- ▶ Understand the importance of reacting to others onstage
- ▶ Be able to make interesting interpretative choices.

### Exercise 1: Trigger words

**Aim:** To help students find their character's motivation to speak.

When rehearsing, students often fall into the trap of switching off when they are not speaking, and so they are not really listening to each other. This exercise will help students focus on what is being said to them, and identify their motivation to respond. This will result in students listening more carefully and reacting appropriately as they prepare to deliver their next line.

Students should analyse their cue line and decide at which point their character would want to reply. It is important to note that this is often not at the end of the cue line; a character might feel compelled to interject earlier (although obviously they can't actually speak). For example, if character B disagrees with what character A has said, they may take a sharp intake of breath and make a stopping gesture, anticipating the opportunity to interject.

### Exercise 2: Repeating

**Aim:** To encourage acting listening and reacting.

This is a variation on Exercise 1. Students often think about their lines in isolation, and this exercise will help remind them that unless they are delivering a monologue they are always listening and responding to others.

The first step is to ask students to repeat the last word that is said to them before they deliver their own line. Encourage students to maintain eye contact with the person they are speaking to, particularly if they still have their scripts in their hands. Once students have become familiar with this you can then extend the exercise. Instead of repeating the last word, ask students to repeat a couple of words or a phrase. For example, if character A says, 'I'm making dinner, do you want to stay for some food?', at the first stage character B would repeat, 'Food?' and then, 'Stay for some food?'

Students should think about *how* they repeat the words or phrase and how they might express their reaction physically and vocally. This will help them discover how their character feels about what is being said to them.

### Exercise 3: Reading-in

**Aim:** To free students from the constraints of holding a script in the early stages of rehearsal.

When students first start putting a scene on its feet they are often inhibited by their scripts, which means there is little real contact or communication between characters onstage. This exercise is really useful in the early stages of rehearsal

Students often have misconceptions about who they are speaking to or about. To clarify their understanding, ask them to point to whoever they are speaking to as they play their scene. They should also gesture to any character or place they mention.

Take a scene that you are working on and after reading it through a few times ask your students to record themselves delivering the lines – this can easily be done using a mobile phone. They should deliver the text as neutrally as possible. Ask them to listen to the recording of their scene being played back. Every time they hear a word in their text beginning with the letter T or D, the person who spoke that line should jump in the air, while their partner should sit on the floor and return to standing as quickly as possible. This exercise really focuses attention on the script and encourages active listening. You can make up your own rules – the more ridiculous the better!

This exercise is beginning to touch upon some of the principles of the Meisner technique. *Meisner in Practice: A Guide for Actors, Directors and Teachers* by Nick Moseley is published by Nick Hern Books.

to help them explore the scene without necessarily knowing their lines. It will encourage them to start to make interesting interpretative choices. This also works well for students who find sight-reading challenging.

Students who are acting go into the space without their scripts. Allocate each student a partner who will stand discreetly behind them and feed them their lines, phrase by phrase. Students who are reading-in must ensure that each 'phrase' is a complete thought, although sometimes it is necessary to break up a complicated sentence. They should try to speak the line as neutrally as possible. The actors in the scene must try to stay focused on making contact with each other. They shouldn't feel rushed into playing their text, encourage them to really search for an exciting and interesting choice before delivering their line. They should consider how the line is delivered vocally and how they might physicalise their intention through gesture and movement.

Encourage the students who are acting to react to every phrase that is played to them. It is important to note that in this exercise there may be longer pauses in the way the scene is played compared to performance. During these pauses students should try to stay engaged with each other and 'in the moment'.

Reading-in is a technique used by Mike Alfreds and is described in detail in *Different Every Night* published by Nick Hern Books.

## Staging and Blocking

### Learning objectives

By completing these exercises students will:

- ▶ Have the confidence to begin blocking movement onstage
- ▶ Understand the importance of motivated and purposeful movement
- ▶ Be able to make effective staging choices.

### Exercise 1: Getting familiar with set and props

Aim: To encourage students to explore staging possibilities.

When students first start to put a scene on its feet they are often lost in space, unable to visualise their environment. Scenes end up being very static and uninteresting. This exercise will help students explore the space they are working in and the possibilities presented by set and furniture.

Ask students to read the scene they are working on and identify what is needed in terms of set and furniture. They should then use masking tape to mark up the perimeters of the set, including entrances, to delineate the space. Initially, any furniture in the scene should be represented by a sheet of flipchart paper. This allows students to experiment with where objects are placed in the space. Once this has been decided the sheets of paper can be replaced with real or stand-in furniture.

Now ask the students to explore the set and space, initially one at a time, perhaps beginning with the character who is most at home in this environment. Encourage the students to experiment with different ways of interacting with the set, for example different ways and places that they might sit, where they could lean, where they might be able to use the floor, etc. Some characters might feel uncomfortable or unfamiliar with the space and students can explore how this might inform a sitting position, or how they may use elements of the set as a barrier. You might want to play some appropriate music in the background while students work.

A further extension of this exercise could take place later in rehearsals once students are familiar with their lines and are working on their actual set. Ask students to do a run of a scene or section of the play, where the focus is entirely on the set and furniture. This is almost like a secret game where every character must try to use every piece of furniture during the run. It's important to note that this is a rehearsal exercise, so students can be as creative as they wish, for example lying underneath a coffee table or standing on a table. This can result in surprising but effective staging choices that can be applied to performance.

### Exercise 2: Towards, Away, Still

Aim: To help students make motivated choices about movement.

This exercise helps students find a starting point for blocking their movement in a scene, ensuring that their choices are motivated. Often students will move too much onstage (wandering feet syndrome!) and this exercise also encourages students to consider the power of stillness.

As students say each line they should make a strong choice about whether they move towards the person being addressed, move away or remain still. These moves can be large or subtle, as in several steps away or a slight turn of the

shoulder. The person receiving the line can also decide if they react by moving away, towards or by standing their ground, before they deliver their response. This exercise should result in purposeful movement without the need for an external director.

### Exercise 3: Passing the object

**Aim:** To explore the power dynamics of a scene and how this informs staging.

Another way of exploring staging choices is to introduce an object which is passed like a baton between the performers as they play the scene. The first stage of this exercise is to ask the students to take the baton when it is their turn to speak. Develop this by then asking the students to give the baton to the next speaker. The third stage of the exercise involves students making a choice about whether their character will give or take the baton. They should also think about how it is being exchanged. For example, it might be grabbed in anger or given with love. This might lead to potential conflict as one character may not wish to give up the baton, resulting in a struggle or even a chase. Finally, students should play the scene again without the baton being present, maintaining as much of the intention and staging as they can.

Encourage your students to annotate their scripts with the choices they are making so that they don't get forgotten. When students come to produce written reflections on their work they will also have a record of their staging.

Another fun way of encouraging students to consider dynamics is to use post-it notes in rehearsal. When a student feels like they have gained status over another character they should stick the post-it note on their body. It's interesting to see how many notes each character has at the end of the scene.

## Exploring Character

### Learning objectives

By completing these exercises students will:

- ▶ Extend their range of physical characterisation
- ▶ Understand their character's given circumstances and how this informs performance
- ▶ Be able to create a fully-rounded, three-dimensional character.

### Exercise 1: The Elements

**Aim:** To explore physical characterization.

Ask your students to find a space to work individually, to close their eyes and focus on their breathing. Explain that you are going to explore physically the four elements of Fire, Water, Air and Earth. They should try to commit to the exercise as fully as possible. Ask your students to visualise Fire and, moving around the space, to start to become this element with every part of their body. They should imagine they are fire in their stomach, their arms, their feet. Ask your students to think about what energy level they feel is appropriate, what direction the movement is taking, and how the element affects their breathing. Encourage your students to work physically in quite a large and bold way. After a while you can ask them to internalise the quality so that it becomes more subtle. Now move onto the element of Water and repeat the exploration. How has the energy level changed? In what direction does the movement go now? What space does water want to fill? The exercise can then be repeated to explore the qualities of Air and Earth. The latter is perhaps the most difficult as all the other elements are visibly in motion, whereas Earth is solid and unmoving. Suggest slow motion to help physicalise this quality.

After the exploration of the four elements, students can then apply these movement qualities to their text work. What happens when Water and Earth are in dialogue? A character may change elements within a speech or scene. Often interesting results can be thrown up when you play an opposite element to what may seem obvious.

Other useful exercises for exploring physical characterisation include: leading with body parts, animal qualities, tension states, Laban efforts and Archetypes.

### Exercise 2: Entrances

**Aim:** To help students understand how to enter a scene, taking into account their character's given circumstances.

Making a strong entrance is important in establishing character at the beginning of a scene. This exercise will help students think more carefully about their offstage preparation prior to entering. For every entrance students should answer the following questions:

- ▶ Where is my character coming from?
- ▶ Where are they going to?
- ▶ Why?
- ▶ How am I feeling?

Once these questions have been answered students can then consider how they impact on performance. For example, looking at the character of Raleigh in *Journey's End* by R. C. Sheriff, the responses would be:

- ▶ He has travelled from England to France by boat, walking through the trenches of the front-line for the first time.
- ▶ He is on his way to report for duty to Captain Stanhope, a childhood friend whom he hasn't seen for many years.
- ▶ He has arrived to fight as a soldier in the First World War.
- ▶ He feels a mixture of exhaustion, nervous excitement and shock at the conditions in the trenches.

### Exercise 3: Emotional extremes

Aim: To help students find emotional variation in their performance.

Often students will see characters as being one-dimensional, for example playing 'angry' throughout a scene. In reality, people are much more complex and every character has the potential to show every human emotion. Also, more interesting interpretative choices can be made by playing against the most obvious choice.

This exercise works particularly well when students are working on a monologue, although the principles can also be applied to group scenes. Ask the students to read through their speech or scene and note down three emotions that their character expresses. They should then perform the scene three times, focussing on each different emotion in turn. The exercise may stretch the scene out of shape, but it encourages students to be flexible and open to possibilities. After each emotion has been explored the student can highlight particular lines in different colours, identifying where each emotion felt most effective.

As an extension of this exercise it can be useful to explore any off-stage action through improvisation. For example, in *Abigail's Party* Tony and Laurence both go around to Sue's house to check on the party and Tony comes back with a wet shirt. It's not clear from the text exactly what has happened – but the actors need to know. In many plays the main action is happening off-stage or between scenes and the characters on-stage are reacting to this.

An alternative approach to this exercise is to focus on three different points of concentration. These could be drawn from the given circumstances, for example the time of day, the weather or character relationships. Re-enact the scene focussing on each one in turn.