

# Physical Theatre: Approaches to teaching in the style of Frantic Assembly

# KS3

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## Introduction

The overall aim of this scheme of work is to explore a physical theatre style by introducing students to the work of Frantic Assembly, and to encourage learners to try out techniques and practical starting points to help them create short devised pieces.

It can be difficult for students who have never devised their own work before to create original and thought-provoking pieces, especially in Year 9. It is also a challenge to create scripted work as they will have a limited experience of this. This is why I think a more physical approach to creating pieces, without having to think about how to develop characters and storylines initially, can work really well.

Although you may not think the work of Frantic Assembly would be approachable for students as young as Year 9, it is amazing how quickly they get to grips with the style. It is also a good preparation for upcoming GCSE courses, as an increasing number of exam boards are prescribing styles for devised and text work at GCSE.

As students' work develops, stories emerge and meaning is created. They learn to take a practical 'on their feet' approach to the creation of work and I have found that some interesting and mature work has been produced as a result – much more so than if they had been asked to create something in a naturalistic style, as at this young age their pieces can be quite limited.

If they have never seen a production by Frantic Assembly, it is important that you show them lots of show reels and trailers of their work, so that they start to understand what the result looks like, and so that they can get a flavour of what the style looks like on stage. I have therefore provided many links to video extracts in this scheme, and most lessons will include a video example to show to students before they attempt an exercise for themselves.

This scheme covers six lessons of teaching. I have based the structure around the principle of one lesson a week, with each lesson being around an hour in length.

### Learning objectives for the scheme

By the end of this scheme of work, students will have a deeper understanding of modern physical theatre within the context of a contemporary company, focusing on the style of Frantic Assembly. They will be familiar with some of their work and have tried out techniques for themselves. Learners will explore a range of practical exercises in order to start developing ideas and approaches to short devised work.

### Resources

- ▶ Frantic Assembly website – <https://www.franticassembly.co.uk/>
- ▶ *The Frantic Assembly Book of Devising Theatre* by Scott Graham and Steven Hoggett (ISBN: 1-138-77701-3)
- ▶ YouTube clips of their shows – links detailed in the scheme
- ▶ Blocks or chairs
- ▶ Scrap paper
- ▶ A wide range of music (some track suggestions are listed in this scheme, but you can use whatever you enjoy and think works with your class – they might suggest some great choices as well!)
- ▶ DVD of *Black Watch* by The National Theatre of Scotland. Available on Amazon: [https://www.amazon.co.uk/Black-Watch-DVD-Brain-Ferguson/dp/B001FTGUAO/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1517136744&sr=8-1&keywords=black+watch+dvd](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Black-Watch-DVD-Brain-Ferguson/dp/B001FTGUAO/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1517136744&sr=8-1&keywords=black+watch+dvd) (Please note – the rating for this show is 18, but this scheme only uses clips with music and no dialogue, therefore the content is appropriate for this age group.)

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### Assessment

- ▶ Peer assessment – assessing the outcome of sections of performed work in class.
- ▶ Filmed assessment – this is a great way for students to review their work and analyse the stories starting to develop within their pieces.

**Research/Homework**

At the end of the first lesson, make sure students are set a homework or research task on Frantic Assembly. Encourage them to access their website, watch trailers and explore music. This will all help students to access the work more effectively.

This may take you longer than one lesson, so feel free to run this into two lessons if you want to spend more time on each exercise.

**Lesson 1: How to devise theatre**

Outcomes: Creating content for a piece of devised theatre through movement.

**Learning objectives**

By the end of this lesson students will have:

- ▶ Used a range of movement exercises to create a sequence
- ▶ Developed the sequence into a short piece of devised movement and started to create meaning
- ▶ Used music, pace and emotions to play around with meaning and develop storylines
- ▶ Started to explore a more physical way of working and to appreciate how many modern theatre companies take this sort of approach.

**Warm-up no. 1: Push Hands**

This is an exercise created by Scott Graham and Steven Hoggett. It can be found in *The Frantic Assembly Book of Devising Theatre*. There is also a video example of this in the 'Learning how to fly' video, created for *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*; it can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q4mXhW7TXQ8>

The exercise is 40 seconds into the video.

In pairs, one person has their palm facing down towards the floor, the other person puts their hand underneath, facing up. The person with their hand underneath adds pressure going upwards and the person on top pushes down to create some tension. The person with their hand on top is leading and must move together with their partner around the room.

Explore levels and pace. If some pairs are particularly confident with this, they can move to the next step, which is for the person whose hand is underneath, to close their eyes and focus solely on the touch.

**Warm-up no. 2: Sequencing moves**

In a circle, standing up, ask students to stand with feet together, explain that they are going to move their feet to one rhythm/action and their arms to another; then they will put the two together to create a sequence. (This is not a Frantic Assembly exercise, but is a good way of getting students to connect their bodies and brains together!)

First, feet. The right leg goes forward on the count of 1; to the side on the count of 2; then back together on 3. Repeat the same process with the left leg. So they have 1, 2, 3 with the right foot, then switch to 1, 2, 3 with the left; forwards, out, together. Then the arms: both arms go out to the front on the count of 1, up above their heads on 2, out to the side on 3, then back down by their sides on 4. So the arms go in a pattern of 4 counts and the legs on 3 counts. Now put the two together! Model this first then encourage students to have a go for themselves. It is tricky!

**Discussion:** Why was this difficult? What is muscle memory? Why do you think it is that after a while, your body can learn the sequence? Move the discussion onto physical styles of theatre. Ask why they think that some modern theatre companies take a physical approach to their work first, before developing the script? Has anyone seen any theatre which features a lot of movement?

**Task 1: Sensory memory exercise**

Following on from warm-up no. 2, students are going to create a sequence of 10 moves to learn. This is based on the exercise 'Hymn Hands' which can be found in *The Frantic Assembly Book of Devising Theatre* and is a slightly simplified version of this exercise. A video example of it can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gUqZPfGIX6U> (5 mins 50 secs into the video).

Facing a partner, decide who is going to go first. The person going first has two choices: put their hand on their partner (stick to the upper body and make the moves very simple, such as a hand on the shoulder) or put their hand on themselves. Once they have done this, the other person in the pair now has three choices: put their hand on their partner, put their hand on themselves, or remove the hand from themselves or from their partner. They should now have two moves. They continue, until they have a sequence of 10 moves all together.

Give students some time to create their sequence, then ask them to repeat it and loop it until it becomes muscle memory. Watch a few of these halfway through this process.

### Task 2

Now ask students to think about making the moves more interesting, by perhaps adding in a turn, moving their hand from one shoulder to another whilst their partner ducks their head, or switching places during the sequence. Give them a bit more time to adjust their sequences a little. You can show the video example again here to give them ideas.

### Task 3

They are going to develop these sequences into a short piece of theatre. They are not going to add in characters or a storyline, but ask them to vary the pace. Encourage them to run the entire sequence through very quickly, or try the whole of it slowed down, or just a particular move slowed down. Experiment with pace and see which version they like the best.

While they are rehearsing, play some music in the background. Play two different tracks, one fast and one slower. I like to use something like Basement Jaxx' 'Where's your head at' as it's really upbeat and gets them moving. For a slower track, Nihls Frahm's 'Corn' is beautiful (this was used in Frantic Assembly's production of *Things I Know to be True*) or Massive Attack's 'Teardrop' is also very effective.

Once they have rehearsed for enough time to feel confident and have looped their sequence at least twice, ask them to decide on the pace and which piece of music they would like to perform to.

Split the class up into the groups that prefer the fast track and those who want the slower piece of music.

Perform them pair by pair, back to back fast track first, then have a discussion, then ask the groups with the slower track to perform afterwards.

Ask students, while they are watching other pairs, to see if any sort of story starts to emerge. During the discussion consider whether the pace, the music or the actions contributed towards the sorts of characters or stories that came out of the performances.

### Plenary

Discuss some of the following:

- ▶ How was meaning created?
- ▶ What is meant by physical theatre?
- ▶ How could this approach be useful if you were asked to devise a piece of theatre?
- ▶ Has anyone seen any theatre where meaning is conveyed through movement?

### Homework

Research Frantic Assembly. Write down four paragraphs on the following:

1. Explain/outline Frantic Assembly's style of theatre
2. Name some of the work they have performed (if possible focusing on how they used movement to create the story)
3. What do you think of this genre of theatre? Have you seen anything like it before?
4. What themes emerged in the work you saw performed today? Explain what you thought of the pieces you saw.

Use the 'Homework help for Lesson 1' resource included at the end of this scheme to help your students think carefully about how to write analytical pieces of work.

### Extension

For those pairs who are moving quickly through this exercise, ask them to add in an emotion. They could also experiment with contrasting emotions: one person is angry, while the other is sorry. Get them to adapt their movements accordingly.

## Lesson 2: 'Round-by-through'

Outcomes: Developing lifts and using these to create short devised sequences.

### Learning objectives

By the end of this lesson students will have:

- ▶ Used some basic lifts to create a 'string of material'
- ▶ Thought about how the movement might contribute to the meaning.

### Task 1: Physical warm-up

Call out a series of commands (this is taken from ideas in *The Frantic Assembly Book of Devising Theatre*).

- ▶ Fold – fold down smoothly to the floor
- ▶ Unfold – in one movement unfold up to standing again
- ▶ Away – move to the furthest point in the room
- ▶ Person – find a partner and hug them (if this is too much, you can just get them to put their hands on their shoulders)
- ▶ Centre – run as tightly into the centre as you can, but no one should be touching
- ▶ Jump – Take a small jump on the spot
- ▶ Beam of light – imagine there is a beam of light coming from one side of the room. You all have to fit into this beam.

Call out the commands in quick succession and try to get the class to do them as fast, but as smoothly as they can.

### Task 2

Watch the video 'Building Blocks of Devising':

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gUqZPfGIX6U>

Watch the first 5mins 48secs focusing on the exercise 'Round-by-through'

Explain that they are going to use this exercise today and create a short piece of work. It does involve some basic lifts, so they must be careful, go slowly, and use appropriate care. If you have another teacher present, or a drama assistant, you could model some lifts for them before you start.

Then play the video back again, but this time, with the students in pairs, standing in the space, play it in sections, getting them to try out each section, moment by moment. Once they have got the basic moves, encourage them to 'squeeze the air' out of the moves.

Remind them to focus on the moment before, during and after the touch.

### Task 3

Create storyline. There may be moments in your movement sequence already where story is emerging. You may need to focus more on the touch for this to develop, but try to communicate to the audience what situation or scenario is happening between these two characters. It does not need to be a full-blown storyline, but perhaps something as simple as an underlying tension between the two, or a break up, or one is comforting the other. They do not need to add dialogue.

Rehearse these pieces and add music here. You can play different tracks for each pair, or the same one for the whole class. Students might have some music ideas for themselves which you could use.

**Performance:** see each pair in turn. Ask the rest of the class to explain what storyline you think the pairs were trying to communicate.

### Plenary

How was meaning communicated? Do you think dialogue was needed? Why is it so powerful to create meaning with movement and how does an audience understand what is going on? Does it matter if different meanings were communicated?

### Homework

Write a paragraph analysing one pair who performed today. Use the following questions to prompt your answers:

1. How was their storyline communicated? (Eye contact, pace, body language, rhythm)
2. Why do you think Frantic Assembly use so much movement in their work?
3. How can an audience take away meaning from physical pieces of theatre?
4. Why might this be more powerful than dialogue alone?
5. Explain why the piece was effective. 'It was effective because ...'.

## Lesson 3: 'Chair Duets'

Outcomes: Understand the technique of 'Chair Duets' and then create their own sequence.

### Learning objectives

By the end of this lesson students will have:

- ▶ Created their own 'Chair Duets' sequence
- ▶ Combined together with another group to create a performance
- ▶ Thought about how music might contribute or change the meaning of the pieces developed.

Start the lesson by showing three videos explaining what Chair Duets are.

Video 1:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PB-9LERSyY8>

This video has step by step instructions for how to create a chair duet, performed by Steven Hoggett.

Video 2:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nLrabSNRHhg&list=RDnLrabSNRHhg#t=0>

The second video is performed by members of the *Othello* cast.

Video 3:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UJ\\_9Eaog2yw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UJ_9Eaog2yw)

The third video is by a group of A level students, which shows how you might end up performing as a group. It's a nice example for them to follow. You can also play it in the background while they rehearse to give them some ideas.

Then go through the technique in the first video. Go back to the first video and stop it and talk about various moments.

### Task 1

Place students in pairs and play a track to motivate them whilst they rehearse. Give them time to play around with the moves. The chair duets can be done on blocks or chairs depending on what they want to do.

### Task 2

Once they are familiar with the routine, aim for a focal point (in front of them, so it almost looks like they are watching TV).

### Task 3

Combine the groups of two into groups of four. Work on how to incorporate other performers and add the two routines together.

Rehearse. Play with pace. Vary it, or find a moment to speed up/slow down dramatically.

**Perform.** Ask the groups which piece of music they want to use.

Again, make sure the rest of the class are considering what meanings are starting to appear from the movement sequences while they are being performed. Can anyone start to see a storyline develop?

Then choose one group who have performed particularly well, or have an interesting sequence. Get them to perform it to the Basement Jaxx track. Then ask them to repeat their performance, this time to 'Hide and Seek' by Imogen Heap. Ask them to slow the pace down.

**Discussion:** Is the way you view this different from before? Does it now tell a different story?

Music suggestions: Basement Jaxx' 'Supersonic' or Ed Sheeran's 'You Need Me, I Don't Need You', or for something slower, you could try a track by Imogen Heap.

## Lesson 4: Frantic Assembly's work

Outcomes: Understand more about the body of work that Frantic Assembly have created.

### Learning objectives

By the end of this lesson students will have:

- ▶ Developed a letter writing scene and a fight sequence inspired by *Black Watch*.

Watch clips from *Black Watch/Beautiful Burnout/Othello/Love Song/ Things I Know to be True/The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. (All of these are available on YouTube or on the Frantic Assembly website.)

**Discussion:** How do the company use their physicality/physical style to help them portray a story? Why is movement powerful? Why use this technique to portray war/death/love/beauty? How does it speak to the audience more than just dialogue? (Although it is a totally different style, you might wish to reference other practitioners such as Artaud saying 'words are not enough' or Peter Brook and 'The Empty Space').

### Task 1

Watch the letter writing scene from *Black Watch*. You can buy the DVD of this show, or find it online.

(Make sure you only show this section, as there is some very strong language in the rest of the scene.) If you are using the DVD produced by BBC, the letter writing scene starts at 1hr 06mins – 1hr 08 mins in.

Give out scrap paper. Students are going to create their own letter. They can decide who the letter is to and what it is about. It can be fictional, imagining they are a soldier at war, or real, thinking of an important moment or person with whom to communicate. Remind them that the letter is never going to be read out loud, but communicated through gesture. This helps them to be more open with the content. Then think about gesture. How can they communicate some of what was in the letter through gesture alone?

### Task 2

Watch the Frantic Assembly 'Hide and Seek' video:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Dv3mfcAU\\_s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Dv3mfcAU_s)

What gestures were used here and what might they have communicated? I like to play this video again in the background while students are working, to help them come up with ideas.

Ask them to find a space on stage and individually start gesturing their own letter. How can you communicate the sentiments in your letter through your hands and arms?

Work on this individually. Come up with a sequence of moves. Play music to help them with this process.

### Task 3

Perform these letters. It might be a good idea to split the class into three or four groups, as performing something so personal individually might be rather intimidating. If you are able to use lighting here, this can really add to the sense of performance. You could video the work here, and play it back for analysis. Students could then use this video to analyse the work for homework.

### Plenary

How was meaning communicated through gesture alone? Why do you think Frantic Assembly decided to choose to do this at this moment of the play, when they could have used dialogue instead?

## Lessons 5 and 6: Fight sequence

Outcomes: Create a choreographed fight sequence in the style of Frantic Assembly.

### Learning objectives

By the end of this lesson students will have:

- ▶ Created a fight sequence, inspired by *Black Watch* and used some boxing moves from *Beautiful Burnout*
- ▶ Thought about a different approach to fight choreography.

Watch the fight sequence in *Black Watch*. Explain that they are going to create a physical fight sequence inspired by this clip and in this style. How does this differ from a naturalistic fight sequence?

### Task 1: Warm-up

Get the class up on their feet. Do a boxing sequence as a warm-up. Call out a sequence of numbers: 1 = one jab with the right hand; 2 = one jab with the right one with the left; and so on.

Then get them to create an individual sequence of boxing moves imagining they are fighting an opponent in front of them. They can include a jab, an upper cut, a duck and a step forwards or backwards. They should have around 6 - 8 moves in total.

### Task 2

Get into groups of 4. Create a diamond shape. The person at the front is going to perform their boxing moves and the rest of the group is going to learn it and perform it at the same time. If they are getting on well with this, they can then turn 90 degrees and learn the next person's sequence of moves and so on. Aim for accuracy and the group to be moving in time together. It should not be clear who is leading each sequence of moves if they are doing this accurately.

Perform these in groups.

### Task 3

Introduce some more basic lifts – see the *Frantic Assembly Book of Devising Theatre* for ideas if you are unfamiliar with other lifts. Ask them to develop an energetic, fast-paced sequence in pairs.

Then add some lines of text in. They can create these themselves, or you can use lines from *Black Watch*, *Beautiful Burnout* or *Othello*.

Rehearse this. Add in music.

**Perform and evaluate.**

### Homework

Pick a pair and analyse their use of movement. Did they juxtapose text? If so, was it effective? If not, how did the text and movement work together to produce an interesting and tense scene?

### Extension

Does the physical fight have to mirror a shouting match, or can lines of dialogue be about something else? Work with the idea of juxtaposing the fight with something else.

# RESOURCES

## Homework help for Lesson 1

Sentence starters and useful phrases to include to make your work more analytical.

1. Explain/outline Frantic Assembly's style of theatre.  
Key words you could use here: Physical / Explorative / Emotive / Interpretive / Lyrical / Sensory
2. Name some of the work they have performed (if possible focusing on how they used movement to create the story)  
Use the Frantic Assembly website here to help you. Watch some of the videos in the 'Resource' section of the website to understand what messages they were trying to convey.
3. What do you think of this genre of theatre? Have you seen anything like it before?  
Key starting phrases you could use here:  
It was effective because ...  
It made me think about ...  
It is different to naturalistic theatre because ...  
The physical approach was effective because ...  
I have never seen anything like this before, but I thought it was ...
4. What themes emerged in the work you saw performed today? Explain what you thought of the pieces you saw.  
I thought the pieces were interesting because ...  
The audience were able to interpret it individually because ...  
People in the class understood the work differently and I thought this was good because ...  
If you did not enjoy the work that you saw, you can also explain why this was. In- depth critique is also effective, but remember, you must not write 'It was boring' 'It was rubbish' as this is not analytical.
5. Try the following phrases in order to critique something:  
'I do not think it was effective because ...'  
'The sequence of moves were not fluidly put together, therefore the meaning was not clear.'  
'Many audience members did not agree on what the piece was about, therefore I don't think they got their message across clearly enough.'