

Practically exploring characters in play texts: Liz from *Our Country's Good* by Timberlake Wertenbaker

KS5

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Introduction

This scheme explores the play text *Our Country's Good* as a stimulus and specifically traces the character of Liz in key scenes. The activities offer ideas on how to work with play texts practically, with both on- and off-text ideas and activities. The activities outlined develop an understanding of the play text and provide inspiration for the exploration of other scenes or characters in this and other play texts.

Many exam specifications at GCSE and A level now allow for the performance of monologues for assessment, so this scheme also offers insight into the exploration and performance of the key monologue that Liz delivers at the start of Act 2, including writing interpretations for examiners.

Learning objectives

By the end of this scheme all students will:

- ▶ Have improved their understanding of how to develop characterisation – aural and physical
- ▶ Have developed their ability to work in groups or on their own to develop character
- ▶ Have explored the actor-audience relationship
- ▶ Have developed their ability to work effectively with scripts, including how to deconstruct meaning and interpret a writer's craft
- ▶ Have used a variety of rehearsal techniques including those linked to specific writers, styles and practitioners such as Stanislavski.

By the end of this scheme some students will:

- ▶ Have developed their ability to direct others
- ▶ Have developed their creative writing skills and ability to write in-role.

Resources

Our Country's Good by Timberlake Wertenbaker play text

Pre textual exploration research tasks (for example):

- ▶ Research the prevailing conditions in English prisons of the time
- ▶ Research the factors that led to a need for transportation, including the most common crimes of the time and the sentences handed out
- ▶ Research the criminal gangs and fraternities of the time
- ▶ Find out any facts about the first penal colony
- ▶ Find out about the characters in the play – many are based on real people or amalgamations of real people
- ▶ Find out about the conditions on the transport ships
- ▶ Find out about the fate of the Aboriginal people in the immediate vicinity of Sydney
- ▶ Find out about *The Playmaker* – which the play draws from.

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Lessons 1 and 2: Developing an understanding of the social, cultural, historical and political context of *Our Country's Good* and how to stage the opening scene

Learning objectives

By the end of these lessons students will have learnt:

- ▶ How to work collaboratively with others in discussion and practical work
- ▶ How to develop characterisation skills – aural and physical
- ▶ How to interpret meaning
- ▶ How to stage scenes using proxemics, characterisation, lighting, levels, status, etc.
- ▶ How to communicate meaning/messages to an audience.

Starter (15 mins)

Using the research material, produce a series of still images with titles that outline the social, cultural, historical and political context of the time in which the play is set. Each still image must then have a narrated outline of what is being shown and the research informing the image.

Main activity

Although Liz is not explicitly in the opening scene, it is important to explore the scene to see the context for the play as a whole.

Read the whole scene first to absorb the atmosphere. It is a highly engaging, brutal opening where the audience is plunged straight into the mistreatment, punishment, hunger, fear and misery of the convicts, with a clear divide physically and in status between the convicts below deck and the officers who are in charge of them.

As a whole group, discuss ways that a ship at night could be suggested and the atmosphere created for an audience. Consider the importance of sound and light here with questions like:

- ▶ What sounds would conjure up for an audience the feeling of being out at sea?
- ▶ What colours might be used in lighting gels?
- ▶ Where should light sources be?
- ▶ How can the space be defined and different levels of above and below deck be shown without the need for a huge budget?

In groups, find an effective grouping for the prisoners in the hold and consider their proxemics. Where in this grouping would you place the three convicts who speak?

Then rehearse the flogging scene and reactions by Ralph. Discuss which potentially best fits the stage direction of his counting with a barely audible, slow and monotonous voice.

Importantly, consider the response then by Sideway, experimenting with various options. Then, although it isn't mentioned, the reaction by the convicts is important to experiment with.

After explorations, and discussions, in the second lesson students stage the scene, learning lines (for those who speak). Design is incorporated wherever possible.

Plenary

The results are recorded, and watched, or shown to each other's group if the class is big enough to divide into smaller groups (though there should be enough students in each group to give a sense of the many convicts together in the space). Evaluation of the performances, what has been communicated to the audience through the choices, and ideas for further improvements are outlined before then moving on to the specific journey of Liz through the play.

Homework

If you are choosing to only look at certain scenes in a play text exploration, there are methods to be considered for covering the plot development and understanding that occurs within the intervening scenes that aren't explored. Simply setting homework and having an opening Q & A on the intervening scenes could suffice.

Lesson 3: Scene 5 - The emergence of Liz and explorations of status

Learning objectives

By the end of the lesson students will have learnt:

- ▶ How to work collaboratively with others in discussion and practical work
- ▶ How to develop characterisation and performance skills – aural and physical
- ▶ How to use research to inform practical work
- ▶ How to use proxemics and levels, eye contact and other physicality to show status.

Starter

Students undertake a Q & A on scenes 3 and 4.

Status practical

In groups of 3-4, using Boal's image theatre, complete images for the following headings where status is the focus, with one as sculptor and the others ready to be moulded:

- ▶ Bully and victim
- ▶ Teacher and student
- ▶ Servant and king/queen.

Teacher/facilitator picks specific examples that the students have produced, then asks the onlooking 'audience' to evaluate those that were successful. Then, crucially, students are challenged to change the way status is communicated by changing just one physical aspect, e.g. by altering body language or eye contact, change the status of the student/teacher so the former has the higher status.

Main activity

Read scene 5 together and discuss meaning, the way the characters are presented, and then what each character's opinion is of Liz at the start and end of the scene following her very brief appearance.

Deal practically then with the end of the scene where Liz appears – from the '... there is a guffaw. It is Liz Morden' stage direction.

Form a still image for the stage direction that says 'Dabby and Liz stare at each other', with Ralph and Mary also in the still image. Consider proxemics, body language, posture, and eye contact.

Then, play the scene just as a mime. This will highlight the importance in the physicality of the scene.

Plenary

Having explored the moment practically, are there any changes to the students' understanding of character and meaning? What should the audience be left with in terms of understanding?

Lesson 4: Scene 8 – Liz begins to engage with others; exploring dynamics

Learning objectives

By the end of the lesson students will have learnt:

- ▶ How to work collaboratively with others in discussion and practical work
- ▶ How to develop characterisation and performance skills – aural and physical
- ▶ How to use research to inform practical work
- ▶ How to use physicality and voice to demonstrate status and explore dynamics.

Starter

Read the scene together. Discuss initial thoughts, key features, and why Liz might not want the others to know she can't read, in spite of the fact that it was quite common for the time and especially for someone with her position in society.

Main activity

Again, focussing on the point at which Liz comes on, explorations on- and off-text begin, but to start with work up to the entrance of Ketch and no further.

In groups, double up for each character, i.e. two students for Mary, two for Dabby and two for Liz. One person reads the lines; the other is going to voice the subtext/thoughts. To do this effectively, write out what is going to be said as an

This could be extended into a practical with a one-minute own-language version re-caps. To deepen student's thinking they could be asked to write down a summary, then reduce to a single sentence for the overview.

Extension

Each person draws a playing card before starting the scene and the number they draw determines their status. Everyone can all see what card people turn, and they then try to react according to the hierarchy established.

additional script. Consider the things each is hiding or feeling behind what they actually say.

After explorations, discuss understanding that has been developed here about characters. Do we, the audience, have any sympathy or reason to like Liz yet?

Then deal with the section where hangman Ketch comes on. What do students notice about the women and their changed attitudes at this point?

Mark the moment by staging the point where Dabby and Liz seize each other, through to turning on Ketch, in slow motion. Add a thought track from each which they deliver when they seize each other, then another thought track that they deliver while moving in slow motion to round on Ketch. How must they use vocals as well as physicality here to show the changes? How is the use of space and proxemics affected by Ketch's arrival?

Plenary

Watch each group's marking the moment and reflect upon the developing characterisation of Liz.

Lesson 5: Scene 11 – First rehearsal scene exploration

Learning objectives

By the end of the lesson students will have learnt:

- ▶ How to work collaboratively with others in discussion and practical work
- ▶ How to develop characterisation and performance skills – aural and physical
- ▶ How to use creative writing to develop understanding of characterisation.

Starter

Read the scene together. Each student is then assigned a character and writes about the scene from that character's perspective, using the first-person.

This work is then shared and can be discussed or left for discussions later to reflect back upon.

Main activity

Set up the start of the scene as a still image with just the convicts plus Ralph, but not the officers Ross and Campbell, and all students write down two thoughts for their character which complete the following sentences:

- ▶ I am here because ...
- ▶ I feel

Then form a final image after Ross and Campbell leave, completing the sentence:

- ▶ I now feel

Discuss the findings, the objectives for being present, and the outcome of the scene.

Then complete an extended thought track/monologue for Liz outlining:

- ▶ Why did she turn up for rehearsals?
- ▶ What did she hope to get out of taking part?
- ▶ Was she enjoying the rehearsal?
- ▶ What did she feel when Ross and Campbell came in?
- ▶ How does she now feel about the project?
- ▶ How does she now feel about officers and the colony?

Plenary

Discuss what students think will now happen to Liz. What are their feelings about her and how the audience should therefore feel about her at this crucial end of Act 1.

Students should notice that the women who quarrelled before and have been uneasy in each other's company, instantly unite when Ketch enters; he is loathed by all convicts who put aside any other quarrels to round on him whenever he is present.

Extension

Complete a role-on-the-wall for Liz after scene 5, then one for after this scene. Do this after every scene, adding information about Liz from what she says/does/what others say about her. Adding information in different coloured pens with a key can track how the character unfolds throughout the play.

The creative writing could lead to performances in turn of mini monologues for Liz which could lead well into the next lesson.

Lessons 6 and 7: Developing skills in interpreting and performing play text stimuli – specifically Liz’s monologue at the start of Act 2

Learning objectives

By the end of these lessons students will have learnt:

- ▶ How to work collaboratively with others in discussion and practical work
- ▶ How to develop performance skills – characterisation, aural and physical
- ▶ How to develop different methods for interpreting the play text stimuli
- ▶ How to interpret the writer’s craft
- ▶ How to apply Stanislavski’s rehearsal techniques to a given extract/play text.

Starter

Try some exercises on breathing and preparing the body physically.

Main activity

Students read Act 2, scene 1, including the opening monologue by Liz.

Consider why Wertebaker uses the convict slang vocabulary here; what the present tense in telling the story of Liz’s past does for the audience/reader, and what it makes us/the audience feel about Liz and her position in society.

Summarise the main incidents of Liz’s life in England as outlined in her monologue and then show these in a series of still images with titles.

Add thought tracking – not using convict vocabulary – for some of these, reflecting on both Liz in the images and those opinions/the thoughts of those around her in the images.

Consider what this reveals about those around Liz, what it tells us about her, and how our understanding of what she has done in the play so far has been transformed by this monologue.

Students then apply Stanislavski’s system to the monologue, starting with the Given Circumstances.

Questions they answer to begin with are:

- ▶ Where is the scene taking place?
- ▶ What are the relationships that are going on between each character presented?
- ▶ What are the social, cultural, historical and political aspects of the play and of the time period influencing the writer and indeed the characters?
- ▶ What has happened before the scene?

The answers are shared as a class and then the students consider how such information influences performance of the work. Consider this for all characters in the scene, and then specifically for Liz.

Units and objectives

Students work out what each character in the scene’s overall objective is, and indeed whether there are shifts as the scene develops.

Students then discuss how they can show the characters’ objectives, and maybe pick a specific line and practise its delivery for each character (except Liz), where an objective is very clear, or an objective shift takes place.

Emotional Memory

Teach students about Stanislavski’s system and where emotional memory can be used to not act a particular emotion in role, but to feel it. Students identify the various emotional states for Liz in the monologue and seek to try to find a time when they identified with that emotion, and use it to develop depth in role.

Homework between Lessons 6 and 7

Students learn the monologue for homework and put all their understanding into the learning. Their aim is to represent faithfully what they believe the writer intended for their character, based on research and the exercises informing their characterisation choices.

They should also prepare a maximum of 250 words outlining their understanding and interpretation of the character, with close reference to how they intend to deliver key lines which they have identified, as well as justifying which are the key lines. They should refer to specific words with sentences like:

‘On the word X I will stand, increasing the pace. I will do this to communicate X to the audience.’

There are numerous online activities and clips that can help here, such as NT YouTube clips on Shakespeare: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tc_hoG4nec
Books such as *Actor and the Voice* can also provide inspiration.

Through research, either online or using the reference/commentary section of their copy of the play text, students are asked to decipher the vocabulary that Liz uses, which reflects that of the criminal class at the time.

They could then form a paragraph outlining their understanding in relation to all questions, demonstrating their understanding and offering a chance for any misconceptions to be challenged.

Although the focus is on Liz, this should be done for Wisehammer, Caesar and Arscott, Sideway, Mary and Duckling – no matter how brief their appearances.

Role-on-the-wall

This is not a Stanislavski technique, but if you have one completed so far for Liz, it could be looked at, and you can discuss how the new information changes or adds to what has been written before.

Students bring their 250 words to Lesson 7. These are discussed and they must be clear, when challenged, what effect they want to have on the audience for each section/line and how they will physically/vocally achieve this.

Ultimately, in showing what they have rehearsed, the evaluation is of their intention compared with how it actually came across. The feedback uses the 250 words as a guide, e.g.:

'You said you would do X. You did Y and the feeling I got from this as a member of the audience was'. There should then be discussion.

Homework/Plenary after Lesson 7

It is useful for each student to either verbally, or in written format, evaluate the process and indeed the performance and outcome, including the feedback they received.

What their next steps would be, things they have learnt that could take them forward, can be discussed.

Lesson 8: Act 2, scenes 5 and 6

Learning objectives

By the end of these lessons students will have learnt:

- ▶ How to work collaboratively with others in discussion and practical work
- ▶ How to develop performance skills – characterisation, aural and physical
- ▶ How to deconstruct narrative, characterisation, themes and the language within a given play extract.

Starter

Again, start with reading the scenes and initial discussions.

Physicalise Liz's arrival in chains at the start of scene 5 and then cut to the end of scene 5 where she attempts to read her lines but is defeated by the sounds of Arscott being beaten.

Why does she carry on? What does this tell us about the changes in Liz?

Main activity

The scene in which Liz is being measured for her noose is very powerful – the stage directions are key.

Stage the scene in groups: some groups play Liz as defiant, other as defeated; in both cases following the stage directions but with the body language, eye contact, etc., conveying the different attitudes within her silence and non-compliance.

Then focus on the end where she does speak. Why does she tell Harry and Ketch that they are to tell Ralph she didn't steal, but afterwards? Why is it that she wants him to know and why doesn't she tell them to go to him and help her before she is hung?

Stage this in groups, crucially with Liz being polite in her request – she says 'please'. Experiment with her reactions to the madness of Harry and his screaming – does she react, or ignore him in desperation for her point to be made?

Liz has an emerging desire to be part of the community, is thinking of others not just herself, and wants to help others and is willing to be seen as vulnerable.

Discuss explorations and potentially update a role-on-the-wall if one has been filled in during the scheme.

Lesson 9: Exploring Liz's innocence and changed demeanour

Learning objectives

By the end of these lessons students will have learnt:

- ▶ How to work collaboratively with others in discussion and practical work
- ▶ How to develop performance skills – characterisation, aural and physical
- ▶ How to develop different methods for interpreting the play text stimuli
- ▶ How to interpret the writer's craft.

Starter

Students write down all the things that Liz has been accused of in her life and then whether she is innocent or guilty. These can be literal or metaphorical; things like stealing at the camp, all the things she reveals in the monologue, the fact that others say she can't read.

Read scene 10. Discuss what this reveals about why she hadn't spoken out before. Also discuss the way she speaks and the language the writer gives her. Contrast this to the monologue at the start of the Act and discuss what this indicates about Nature versus Nurture and Phillip's experiment in putting on the play.

Main activity

In groups stage the scene. Fix carefully the proxemics and the movement, and the positive, non-confrontational body language Liz adopts. Having rehearsed the end as it is presented, have Liz exit and then improvise what the remaining officers would say once she is gone. What might be their reactions? Would there be surprise or any change in anyone's opinion of her?

Lesson 10: Concluding Liz's journey in the play and transformation as a character

Learning objectives

By the end of these lessons students will have learnt:

- ▶ How to work collaboratively with others in discussion and practical work
- ▶ How to develop performance skills – characterisation, aural and physical
- ▶ How to develop different methods for interpreting the play text stimuli
- ▶ How to interpret the writer's craft.

Starter

Assign a character to each student; in-role they write down their opinion of Liz as they think it would have been at the start of the play.

Have a person playing Liz stand centrally and all the group stand around her – their closeness in the space representing how they felt about her at the start (and as measured in relation to other people's proximity to her as well). They all read their written initial thoughts on Liz.

Main activity

Read the final scene. Discuss the outcomes for all, but especially Liz.

Re-run the starter; this time the convey how each character in the play now feels towards Liz, again standing in the space to represent their closeness/positivity towards her or otherwise, followed by reading thoughts/reflections aloud.

The person portraying Liz at this time writes down what the audience should be thinking of Liz at the start versus what they are thinking at the end.

The final scene presents a good opportunity for directing each other, with complex movement in the space and resolutions in relationships to be clarified.

As well as any practical explorations of the final scene, there needs to be a clear plenary point, offering opportunity to discuss the journey Liz has taken, to assess any roles-on-the-wall, and to clarify her key moments and lines and how in each case the audience is meant to view and respond to Liz.

This should reveal little change in people like Ross in terms of opinion or proxemics, but other convicts, and indeed Ralph, have changed perspective, as has the audience.

Staging her 'key lines' as freeze frames that unfreeze and re-freeze after delivery would be another final practical to demonstrate her journey and conclude understanding, while demonstrating the ability they have developed to portray character, even within the minute opportunities offered in singular lines.