AS/A2

Teaching Drama · Summer term 2 · 2014/15

The Beauty Queen of Leenane
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AS/A2

Introduction

The Beauty Queen of Leenane is a powerful reflection on relationships and mental health. It focuses on the demanding relationship between Maureen and her elderly mother Mag, while raising questions about the lengths people are sometimes driven to. As an audience we swing wildly between the two protagonists, feeling empathy and horror in equal measure. The text offers a great deal for students in terms of performance. It will present challenges, but it also lends itself to a wide range of interpretations, allowing students to experiment with their skills.

This scheme of work is primarily designed to offer activities to develop students’ understanding of the text as well as providing ideas for performance. The activities can all be used after a group has read the text; however, as the text twists and turns, it would also be useful to read the text and use each activity as a small section of text is read.

Session 1: Relationships, subtext and internal monologue

Learning objectives

► To examine the relationship between Mag and Maureen
► To explore the subtext of the opening scene
► To create the characters’ internal monologue.

Warm-up: Cliff-hanger

Ask two students to volunteer to begin a scene. It’s helpful to set a scene or give students a starting line, e.g. Parent and guilty-looking child: Child: I didn’t mean to break it, it just slipped out of my hands.

As the improvisation progresses, either you or a member of the class shouts ‘Freeze!’ When this happens both actors freeze. A new student then enters the circle and taps one of the actors on the shoulder which is a sign that they should leave the improvisation. The new actor then begins a different scene taking into account their partner’s frozen position. The remaining actor takes their cues about who they are and what is happening from the new actor. As soon as the scene begins both actors improvise as before until someone else shouts ‘Freeze!’.

Main activity 1: Examining subtext and internal monologue

In pairs, read and rehearse the opening sequence up to the end of p. 3.

Discussion: On the surface of this scene, what conclusions can we draw about the two characters and their relationship? Who has the highest status? Is it Mag as the elder, or Maureen as the caregiver?

In the same pairs, read the scene and annotate the script with ideas about the subtext of the conversation and suggestions for any internal monologue. E.g.: Mag realises her error in admitting she is capable and tries to backtrack.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Internal monologue</th>
<th>Subtext</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mag: I did take me Complan.</td>
<td>I’m not as incapable as you think I am.</td>
<td>Mag is trying to prove to Maureen that she can manage without her.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maureen: So you can get it yourself so.</td>
<td>Lazy old cow, she has me running around after her when she can do it herself.</td>
<td>Maureen is annoyed that Mag refuses to help when she can manage to do things herself.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mag: I can. (Pause) Although lumpy it was, Maureen.</td>
<td>But I don’t want to do it myself. I want you to do it for me.</td>
<td>Mag realises her error in admitting she is capable and tries to backtrack.</td>
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</table>
**Discussion:** Ask students to share their ideas about the subtext of the scene.

**Performance**

Ask one pair to be the performers for the scene. As they perform ask the audience to raise their hands if they have a suggestion for an internal line. After the script has been spoken, ask as many students as you wish to say their internal line. For the purposes of this performance, students will need to leave an unnaturally large pause between each character's lines in order for you to see if anyone has a line to add. After as many – or few – added lines, the performers should continue. It will obviously be a disjointed performance of the script, but the focus is students’ ideas for internal monologue.

**Discussion:** What impression do we get of the relationship between these two characters from both the text and the subtext created by the added lines?

**Main activity 2: Duologue work**

One of the main features of Martin McDonagh’s work is his extremely crafted use of language and dialect enhanced by the accent. Accents can prove difficult for many students but encourage them to give an Irish accent a go; a good attempt will add to the flow of the script. Another major feature of McDonagh’s work is dark humour, often making an audience laugh outrageously at the blackest of events. In the following extract the conversation about Mag being murdered can be played with a very amusing edge.

In pairs read and rehearse from the bottom of p. 5: ‘Maureen slops the porridge out and hands it to Mag, speaking as she does so’, to the end of scene 1.

**Points to consider:**
- There are a number of stage directions to follow closely.
- Mag is seated for the duration of the scene. How will you use movement from this position?
- Mag is eating while speaking, how will that affect her speech?
- How does Mag feel about the events she is describing in Dublin?
- What point is Mag trying to make?
- How do you feel about Maureen’s comments? Is she joking? How will you use vocal skills to show her meaning? Consider pitch, pace, tone, pause, volume, emphasis.
- What is Maureen feeling during the scene? How will you use movement, physicality, proxemics to demonstrate this?
- How does Mag cut Maureen down?
- How do you respond to Maureen’s reaction?

**Performance and feedback**

Ask a few of the students to perform some of their work. After each performance, ask the audience for comments on the work they have seen. Encourage students to speak using Drama terms about what they like and with points of constructive criticism encourage them to offer practical suggestions of how the work could be improved.

**Discussion:** How would you sum up the relationship between Mag and Maureen?

Create a list on the board and ask each student to contribute a word, phrase or sentence for the group to discuss.
Session 2: Exploring stichomythia and monologue

Learning objectives
- To explore stichomythia using improvisation
- To focus on physical and vocal skills effectively to communicate character to the audience
- To devise and perform a monologue using Maureen’s words.

Warm-up: Stop, go, jump, clap
This is a mixture of a concentration game and a physical warm-up. When you say ‘Go’, students should begin walking, using the whole space and aiming to walk at a fairly brisk pace. The students follow the instructions that you call:
  - Round 1: Stop = stop, go = go, jump = jump, clap = clap
  - Round 2: Stop = go, go = stop, jump = jump, clap = clap
  - Round 3: Stop = go, go = stop, jump = clap, clap = jump
You can add other elements to make the game even more complicated, e.g. turn, hop, sit, kneel and so on.

Main activity 1: Stichomythia exploration
Discussion: A common feature of Greek theatre is stichomythia: one-line exchanges between characters spoken quickly in order to show conflict and to increase dramatic tension and emotional intensity. The second part of the exchange between Ray and Mag on p. 10 (from ‘Isn’t it you who has the bad hip?’) is an example of stichomythia.
  - After reading scene 2, up to Ray’s exit on p.12, discuss what happens in the conversation between Mag and Ray. What is Ray’s motivation in the scene? What does he need to do to achieve his aim? How is Mag stopping him?
  - In pairs, rehearse the scene from p. 10 Ray: ‘Isn’t it you who has the bad hip?’ to Ray’s exit. Encourage students to focus on the vocal elements of the scene. The nature of stichomythia is a fast pace with lines being fired back and forth, and it is challenging.
    - Perform some of the work in progress.

Main activity 2: Stichomythia improvisation
After Ray exits, Mag burns the message that he has written for Maureen.
  - In pairs. Ask students to briefly summarise the main points of action in the scene from when Maureen arrives home up to when Maureen reveals that she met Ray. Ask students to improvise the scene.
  - Points to consider:
    - How will you use movement/physicality to show that Mag is trying to hide something? Remember, her mobility is limited.
    - How will you use movement, physicality and proxemics to show that Maureen knows Mag is lying?
    - What facial expressions will you use to show your feelings to each other and to the audience?
    - How will you use vocal skills in this scene? Consider especially how your character’s voice might change as the scene progresses.
    - Perform some work in progress.

Main activity 3: Maureen’s monologue
There aren’t many monologue opportunities in the text, but there are places where they can be created. The following monologue has been created from the duologue on pp. 15–17. Individually, ask students to rehearse the script for performance. They should pay close attention to:
  - How you will use the space, especially your proximity to the audience. Is the audience Mag?
  - How will you physicalise Maureen? She is slim, but used to hard work, so probably strong and capable.
  - Movement: How will you move round the stage? Will you move at all? Will you be standing or seated?
  - Vocal skills: How will you use your voice in this monologue? Consider pitch, pause, pace, tone, emphasis and volume.
  - Facial expressions: How will your facial expressions portray your character’s feelings?

Extension:
Rehearse the improvisation and perform a more polished version of the scene.
Rehearse the scene as scripted and perform.
Session 3: The Folan Family Album

Learning objectives
- To use tableaux to explore the Folan family's relationships over time.

Warm-up: Keeper of the Keys
Ask students to sit in a circle while a blindfolded volunteer sits on a chair in the middle with a noisy bunch of keys under the chair. Select another volunteer who needs to try to walk all of the way round the circle, into the middle, take the keys and then return back to their seat. If the person in the middle hears them moving they can point in the direction that the noise is coming from. If they point correctly then that person is out and they remain the 'keeper of the keys'. However, if they point incorrectly three times or the keys are successfully stolen then the thief becomes the new keeper of the keys.

Main activity: Family photos
Discussion: Mag and Maureen clearly have a difficult relationship. Do you think it has always been like that? What about when Maureen and her sisters, Annette and Margo, were children? How do you think Mag's relationship is with her other daughters? How is Maureen's relationship with her sisters?

In groups of 4, ask students to create a series of tableaux that depict the relationships of the Folan women then and now. They can choose to have two, three or four of the characters in each image and should aim to show the family over time. Depending on the number of male actors in your class you could have groups of five with a male actor playing the role of father, boyfriend/husband/priest/friend, or directing an image.

Points to consider:
In the creation of a tableau you must tell the audience everything you want them to know without words. Pay careful attention to your use of eye contact, facial expressions, posture, gesture and proximity to other characters. What are your choices telling the audience?

Performance and feedback
On p. 23 the song 'The Spinning Wheel' by Delia Murphy is referred to. It is easily available on YouTube and would make a suitable piece of music to underscore students’ tableaux sequences.

Session 4: Scene 4 ensemble work

Scene 4 is an integral part of the text. We learn a great deal of information and begin to see the characters differently. We are given little snippets of plot that begin to raise many questions for us as to who is in control and who has done what to whom.

Learning objectives
- To work individually, in pairs or threes to explore each unit or rehearsal
- To perform as an ensemble.

Warm-up: Look up, look down
Ask students to stand in a silent circle. You call out 'Look down' and the group does so. When you call 'Look up' the group does so but they must make eye contact with the other characters. The group should continue to look up and down and discuss the new characters.

Do you think I like being stuck up here with you? Eh? Like a dried up oul … (Laughs) Whore? (Pause) Do I not wish, now? Do I not wish? (Pause) Sometimes I dream……. Of anything? (Pause. Quietly) Of anything. Other than this.

I have a dream sometimes there of you, dressed all nice and white, in your coffin there, and me all in black looking in on you, and a fella beside me there, comforting me, the smell of aftershave off him, his arm round me waist. And the fella asks me then if I’ll be going for a drink with him at his place after. I say ‘Aye, what’s stopping me now?’

It isn’t a dream-dream at all. It’s more of a daydream. Y’know, something happy to be thinking of when I’m scraping the skitter out of them hens.

I suppose now you’ll never be dying. You’ll be hanging on forever, just to spite me.

Do you want a Kimberley? You’ve ate all the shortbread fingers. Like a pig.

(This script can easily be adapted for male actors to make it more suitable.)

Rehearse and perform.
contact with someone across the circle. If eye contact is made then the two people sit down. If someone's eyes wander, and they look at more than one person, then they are out. Keep the game moving until everyone is out.

Discussion – Maureen's life:
We learn from p. 15 that Maureen has kissed only two men in her forty years, and that she has been caring for Mag for twenty years while her sisters are away and married. We know she resents being stuck in the house with Mag. How do you think she sees her future? What does Pato represent for Maureen? What does Pato represent for Mag?

Main activity: Recreating scene 4 as an ensemble
Scene 4 has been divided below into seven units of rehearsal. Each unit requires one, two or three actors. Divide the class into the relevant groups for each unit. Where the groups are larger, students can choose any of the units to perform after each of the seven have been covered once, e.g. in a group of 15 you might repeat units two and three.

Rehearsal unit 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actors</th>
<th>Character/s</th>
<th>Extract</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Mag</td>
<td>P.25, Mag enters, pours potty into kitchen sink and performs monologue up to Mag: You won’t be catching me out so easily.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Consider:</strong> There are a number of stage directions to follow. Mag is old and not very sprightly, she has also just got up – how might this affect her movement. She is talking to herself and Maureen in this section of the scene.</td>
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Rehearsal unit 2

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actors</th>
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<th>Extract</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Pato and Mag</td>
<td>From Pato’s entrance to p. 27 Mag: Careful is it? Uh-huh…</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Consider:</strong> Mag has no idea that Pato is in the house, she is shocked. Pato might be somewhat surprised to see Mag although he knows she is there. Pato wanted to sneak away but Maureen talked him out of it. He feels awkward but is polite and helpful. How will you show his internal feelings of awkwardness?</td>
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Rehearsal unit 3

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<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Pato, Maureen and Mag</td>
<td>From Maureen’s entrance to p. 29 Pato takes his tea, sipping it squamishly.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Consider:</strong> Maureen’s overtly sexual behaviour and use of language is primarily to shock, annoy and scandalise her mother. How might you use eye contact to further emphasise Maureen’s intent?</td>
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Rehearsal unit 4

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Extract</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Pato, Maureen and Mag</td>
<td>P.29 Mag: Put some clothes on you to p.31 Maureen: I do.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Consider:</strong> Mag’s revelation that Maureen has had mental health issues is thrown into the conversation out of spite on Mag’s part. Why would she do this to her daughter? What is her motivation? What does Pato’s reaction tell us about our changing attitudes to mental health?</td>
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Rehearsal unit 5

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<tr>
<th>Actors</th>
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<th>Extract</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Maureen</td>
<td>P.31 up to <em>Maureen: And after that it all just got to me.</em>  &lt;br&gt;<strong>Consider:</strong> What effect did Maureen’s experience of England have on her? At this point, how do you want the audience to feel about Maureen? Compare the Maureen we see here to the Maureen we have seen up until now – how will you use Drama skills to show her vulnerability?</td>
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Rehearsal unit 6

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<tr>
<th>Actors</th>
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<th>Extract</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Pato and Maureen</td>
<td>From <em>Pato: That’s all past and behind you know anyways, Maureen</em> to p.33 <em>Pato: Maureen</em> ...  &lt;br&gt;<strong>Consider:</strong> What does Maureen’s misinterpretation of Pato’s words suggest about her? How do we feel when she pushes him away?</td>
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Rehearsal unit 7

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<tr>
<th>Actors</th>
<th>Character/s</th>
<th>Extract</th>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Pato, Maureen and Mag</td>
<td>From p.33 <em>Mag: Eh? Here's the papers now</em>, to p.34 end of scene 4.  &lt;br&gt;<strong>Consider:</strong> Before Maureen exits, how you can show her depth of feeling? She doesn’t use much dialogue so facial expressions, eye contact, movement, posture, proxemics and vocal skills all need to show a lot of emotion. How does Mag feel about what has happened? How will you show this?</td>
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After some time to rehearse, ask students to position themselves in the round in a suitable starting position. While groups are performing the others must remain frozen. After they have performed their unit they can either freeze in an end position or stand in a neutral position to watch the rest of the work.

Performance and feedback

For this feedback session it might be pertinent for students to focus on how their peers created characters with particular focus on their use of physical and vocal skills.

**Session 5: Creating the darkness**

**Learning objectives**
- To focus on proxemics to create the ‘boiling oil’ section of scene 8
- To use multiple characterisation to explore different sides of Mag and Maureen.

**Warm-up: Questions**
Ask for two volunteers to stand in the performance space. Provide them with a setting, e.g. at a bus stop, and then ask them to improvise a scene using only questions. If either of them says a statement they have to stop and sit back down. You then ask for another volunteer, provide them with another setting and the exercise continues.

**Main activity 1: The ‘boiling oil’ scene**
In scene 7 it’s revealed that Maureen was indeed responsible for Mag’s scalded hand. Creating the darkness in McDonagh’s plays can be challenging for students. This session has a focus on proxemics to create the ‘oil’ section of scene 8. To stage this scene you will require a floor light with an orange gel and an appropriate sound effect.

In pairs. After reading scene 8 carefully, ask students to focus on p. 45 from *Maureen gives Mag a shortbread finger, after waving it phallically in the air a moment* to the end of the scene. Ask students to edit the scene down to what they feel is the minimum dialogue...
that can be used to still make the scene accessible to the audience. Using the stage as below, ask students to rehearse their scene. The floor light should represent the range; when Maureen turns it on the light should begin to slowly fade up along with the sound effect. When Maureen pushes Mag's hand onto the range, this should take place above the floor light. Encourage students to perform as much of the scene as possible out towards the audience in as close proximity as possible.

The use of proxemics here can be really well linked to Artaud's 'Theatre of Cruelty'.

Performance and feedback.

Points to consider:
- How does watching the action from such close proximity make you feel?
- Do you need to see the scalding of the hand or is closeness of the actors’ facial expressions and physical reactions enough?
- How will the next stage of the action, when Mag falls from the chair (p.51) impact on the audience?
- How would you stage this?

Main activity 2: The ‘boiling oil’ scene (continued)
In groups of six. Repeat this section of the scene but this time with three students taking on the role of Mag and three taking on the role of Maureen. Students should go back to the full script in order to give each person a range of lines, but may also choose to add lines as they wish to explore each side of the character. Some ideas for the different sides to each character are:

Mag 1: The Mag we’ve seen throughout the play; manipulative and spiteful.
Mag 2: A vulnerable, frightened old woman being badly treated.
Mag 3: The mother she must have once been, confused as to how they’ve ended up here.
Maureen 1: The mentally unstable woman who is about to burn her mother’s hand.
Maureen 2: The vulnerable daughter who has been taunted by her vicious mother.
Maureen 3: The daughter she perhaps once was, confused at what she has been driven to.

Rehearse, perform and feedback.