

# Forum theatre: Interesting things happen on the way

David Porter

KS3/4

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## Introduction

In developing characterisation, students often become precious about their first roles and are unable to develop them fully to drive a story. Forum theatre is a technique that requires students to develop characters, yet be flexible and inventive enough to adapt, or even change them altogether. This scheme opens up the flexibility required to make good character-driven drama that can be comical, serious or convey a message.

### Learning objectives

By the end of this scheme, learners will have:

- ▶ Explored developing characters and progressed it further by bringing in external factors
- ▶ Considered how plot is driven by evolving characters
- ▶ Developed collaborative and solo characterisation skills.

### Scheme in summary

After an introduction on building a character and being prepared to change and/or swap according to suggestions from others, the scheme suggests ways of changing plot, roles, using outsiders and working towards a shared performance to try out the forum technique. It concludes with ways of using it to give voice to issues and people, and trying the technique in a 'performance' situation.

#### Session 1: Build a character

Introduction to creating a character that then must be changed.

#### Session 2: Change the plot

How the storyline itself can be altered, improved, experimented with.

#### Session 3: Change the performer

How multiroling and swapping can build drama devising and performing skills.

#### Session 4: Bring in strangers

How the use of audience and others coming into a scene can change everything.

#### Session 5: Delivering the message

How a forum drama can carry a message to an audience by this technique.

#### Session 6: Testing the theories

A final 'performance' of a forum piece and the drama lessons learned.

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Roman Forum by Carla Favares

### Time

Teachers may feel that the sessions, particularly the first session and the ones on Boal, should be spread over more time, which is a good idea as there are so many possibilities for a steady progression in characterisation through this technique.

### Collaboration

Drama, like team sports, is a collaborative exercise and the forum theatre technique fully supports that concept by demonstrating how others may suggest improvements to one's work and send it in original, inventive and perhaps unusual directions.

## Session 1: Build a character

### Learning objectives

By the end of this introductory lesson students will have:

- ▶ Explored approaches to creating characters flexibly
- ▶ Developed collaborative devising techniques
- ▶ Improved their skills in performing characters
- ▶ Understood the difference between role and character.

### Warm-up (10 mins)

- a. In pairs, create a short scene where a teacher criticises a student for attitude, homework or behaviour. Share and show some.
- b. Repeat with new information: the teacher is having a bad day because he/she overslept, his/her car wouldn't start, he/she was told to do better by management following an Ofsted visit. The student had his/her phone stolen this morning, his/her pet has gone missing and he/she has a headache. Share and show the same pairs.

### Discussion/questions and new learning (5 mins)

What was the difference between the two warm-ups? It was the background information that made the characters interesting. Suddenly they become real, they have a backstory and that helps make what they do and say more fascinating to watch and with which to engage.

So this is the difference between a role (e.g. teacher, student, mum, doctor, old man) and a character (e.g. middle-aged teacher with a range of problems, worries, fears, anger, frustrations, disappointments, loves, joys and ambitions).

The character is human; the role is a label. In drama we need *characters*.

Ask students to complete the Character Questionnaire (see Resources at the end of this scheme) which will bring that person to life.

### Development 1 (10 mins)

In groups of 4/5 each with his/her chosen character. Create one very short scene in which these people are believably together in one of the following situations:

- ▶ At a bus stop
- ▶ In a car park
- ▶ In a the crowd at a sports game
- ▶ In a fast-food outlet.

There doesn't have to be an outcome; we are simply seeing where these 4 or 5 characters might take us with a story, but the story *must* focus on two characters, with the others playing minor, supporting parts.

Share and show some of the groups.

### Development 2 (10 mins)

Same groups, same setting, but now let's change the environment and see what effect it has on the story so far:

- ▶ The weather turns bad
- ▶ The weather turns hot
- ▶ There is a power cut
- ▶ Someone is taken seriously ill.

Share and show some of the groups.

### Development 3 (10 mins)

Keeping the information and characters developed so far, swap roles within the groups and replay the previous scene. What differences, if any, will there be with different students playing each other's parts?

Share and show some of the groups.

### Development 4 (10 mins)

Refocus the last scene by focusing the attention on one of the minor characters and making the story about them, but keeping the main points as you have now developed them.

Share and show some of the groups.

### Resources for teachers:

- ▶ Impact Factory, Stop Start Theatre courses, gives useful background to the method  
<http://www.impactfactory.com/tailored-training/designer-training/forum-theatre-or-stop-start-theatre>
- ▶ Forum Theatre Workshop information  
<http://www.dramatherapy.org.uk/forumtheatre/>
- ▶ Forum4All, US site of forum theatre information and link to Mixed Blood Theatre  
<http://forum-theatre.com/forum-for-all>

### The forum

Originating from the Roman place of meeting to discuss topics of public concern, the theatrical form is a device for creating an interactive drama experience, developing character-driven plot and building problem-solving skills.

### Flexibility

Forum theatre requires lots of flexibility, something with which teenagers often struggle. An interesting and useful set of character notes is at Lifestyle-Homeschool, which unintentionally gives drama character ideas too: [www.lifestyle-homeschool.com/Character-Notes-Flexibility.html](http://www.lifestyle-homeschool.com/Character-Notes-Flexibility.html)

### Including all abilities

When putting together groups, all abilities should be included at the outset and when changes are made, candidates with different skills, backgrounds, command of language and physicalities should be deliberately included in all developments.

### Stretching

Without warning, ask a student who is to be stretched and challenged to enter a scene as an unexpected character, critic, disruptive, angry person, very old person, very generous or drunken person, depending on how any given group could cope with it.

**Plenary and discussion (10 mins)**

What have we learned about changing story and characters? Did swapping roles help or not, and why? Note the three different ways we changed what we were doing as we went along: we changed the circumstances, changed the actors and changed the focus to make a minor character into a main one.

That technique is called forum theatre.

**Session 2: Change the plot****Learning objectives**

By the end of this lesson students will have:

- ▶ Explored the flexibility of characters through improvisation
- ▶ Developed collaborative devising techniques
- ▶ Improved their skills in performing characters
- ▶ Further understood the difference between role and character.

**Warm-up (20 mins)**

In same groups and using same characters as in warm-up or last session or creating new ones, devise a very short scene where the following scenario is created:

*'A has a past he/she wants to forget; works well with B and C until D (and E) discovers the secret and wants to reveal it.'* Why? What happens?

Remember to give your characters depth; don't make them simply roles or stereotypes.

The teacher makes suggestions on how the plot and/or a character could have been changed to improve the audience experience and why. If necessary step into the action of each group to demonstrate forum theatre.

Selected students are invited to add their own critiques and suggestions.

**Discussion/questions and new learning (10 mins)**

What is forum theatre as introduced last session? It is the changing and development of a piece of drama through interaction of audience and/or performers in a group. Change(s) should improve the piece - make it funnier, less over the top, more realistic or carry more of a message.

Show the BBC Bitesize clip on forum theatre in action. (See link in Resources for teachers/students box opposite.)

**Development 1 (20 mins)**

Each group polishes its scene from the warm-up in the light of the discussion and video with a focus on making the plot transparent and easily understood through the characters.

**Development 2 (20 mins)**

Groups in turn share their scenes. At any point any member of the audience can put their hand up to offer a suggestion and then *either* replace an actor in the group themselves or simply redirect the existing actor.

**Plenary and discussion (5 mins)**

What more have we learned about forum? It's a useful device for developing both character and plot? How do we see that? How did it make you feel when your story went in a different direction? On reflection, what more would you have liked to change in another group?

**Homework/follow up**

Watch an episode of a TV soap drama and note any occasions when the arrival of someone into a scene or fresh information coming in changes everything at that precise moment.

**Resources for teachers/students:**

- ▶ BBC Bitesize; excellent video clip of a piece of forum theatre in action developing a story  
[http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/drama/exploring/explorative\\_strategiesrev7.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/drama/exploring/explorative_strategiesrev7.shtml)
- ▶ Extant Forum Theatre, showing one project using research and performance with visually impaired people  
[http://extant.org.uk/projects/forum\\_theatre](http://extant.org.uk/projects/forum_theatre).

**Exercises**

Where a very short scene is asked to be devised, students should time themselves and when sharing teacher cuts off material that goes over the limit. This is a good exercise in keeping to the point and is necessary to provide material for forum changes.

**Inclusion and stretching**

Those who rarely contribute ideas should be specifically encouraged to make suggestions in forum and those who need challenging should be invited sometimes to work together with them to come up with ideas which are worked into the scenes of others, in pairs.

**Celebrate the differences**

Forum is often aimed at the disaffected, disenfranchised and the put-upon, so remind students that characters do not all have to be young, fit and healthy - characters overcoming/living with mental/physical/emotional difficulties are more interesting.

**Homework/follow up**

Write a list of three things that were changed in your own group's piece or another group's piece and explain in a few lines: a) how it was improved; and b) how it was not improved.

## Session 3: Change the performer

### Learning objectives

By the end of this lesson students will have:

- ▶ Explored the flexibility of characters through improvisation
- ▶ Developed collaborative devising techniques
- ▶ Improved their skills in performing characters
- ▶ Further understood the difference between role and character.

### Warm-up (10 mins)

In groups of 4/5, devise a two-minute scene in which one character (same as last session if it seems appropriate) is reaching the end of their patience/tolerance with one or all of the others. Decide on the setting and show the falling out, the end of the friendship or relationship.

All groups share and show.

### Discussion/questions and new learning (5 mins)

Recap what we have learned about forum theatre and how characters can be developed through it, and therefore how plot can unfold and grow with them.

It requires more adventurous working, that there is an element of the unknown which helps devising skills too. As a member of the audience you have to follow all that is going in front of you in order to intervene and/or make suggestions.

In many forum theatre experiments, changes are made over and over until a version and satisfactory outcome is achieved and which could then be scripted to make a definitive template. Or some groups prefer to start afresh from their original idea in each presentation.

### Development (40 mins)

Using the same scene as developed in the warm-up, develop the next two minutes of your story. When that is to be shared, this is the sequence for each group in turn:

- a. A volunteer from the audience summarises your first 2 minutes in the warm-up
- b. You perform the next two minutes
- c. The teacher shouts 'Freeze!' and replaces the group one by one with audience members
- d. You then improvise the next two minutes without preparation.

As a variation on this, one of the original group could remain in his/her original role and/or a third scene is improvised by the original members returning to their own/others' roles.

### Plenary and discussion (5 mins)

How did the idea of changing people frequently help develop an exciting piece of unexpected drama (if it did) and why? Is there any limit to how many times characters could be changed and the story pushed forward?

Is there an instinct by one or more students to take over as director at any point, as they are unwilling to rely on chance in this way?

### Resources for teachers:

- ▶ Characters under stress; useful ideas about film/TV characters applicable to drama lessons  
<http://www.scriptmag.com/features/script-angel-characters-stress>
- ▶ High stress personality characteristics; helpful approaches to adding tension to characters  
<http://www.scriptmag.com/features/script-angel-characters-stress>
- ▶ 66 character traits - ideas for creating depth in character devising  
<http://character-in-action.com/list-of-character-traits/>

### Multi-roling

Students playing two or more parts during a play or devising is second-nature and certainly practical if more characters are needed in a group. In a sense forum is an extension of that, but the bigger point is that it drives on into the unknown in order to produce a better outcome.

### Inclusion and stretching

Those who rarely contribute ideas should be specifically encouraged to make suggestions in forum and those who need challenging should be invited sometimes to work together with them to come up with ideas which are worked into the scenes of others, in pairs.

### Newcomers' experiences

Bringing in members of the audience adds new ideas and experiences. So, where forum is used to convey a (political) message, the experience may be from the homeless, disabled or persecuted - whoever is the category being performed for, to and with. This is true interactive theatre.

### Homework/follow up

Imagine you are a stage director and are to present your group piece from your start to however it finished up as a polished performance. Make a list of what *you* would do to ensure it makes sense to an audience watching a full performance.

## Session 4: Bring in strangers

### Learning objectives

By the end of this lesson students will have:

- ▶ Explored the flexibility of characters through improvisation
- ▶ Developed collaborative devising techniques
- ▶ Improved their skills in performing characters
- ▶ Considered the value of information from audiences in the devising process.

### Warm-up (15 mins)

In pairs adopt a character each and set up a two-minute scene in which both characters look at the same thing/person/event but see it in completely different ways. Build in a point where you, in character, ask the audience for help in moving the piece forward and then do so.

Share and show some sample pairs.

### Discussion/questions and new learning (10 mins)

In that warm-up, we artificially built in a request for audience help in character. In forum theatre which is being devised as it goes along, any performer can stop and ask the audience for help. This is a useful device to involve them more closely in the action and allows them to share something of their own lives.

Watch the video clip about Cardboard Citizens, forum theatre projects with the homeless, and focus on what homelessness is and what consequences it has on society:

<http://cardboardcitizens.org.uk/forum-theatre-tour>

### Development (25 mins)

In groups of 4/5, develop a scene where two or three characters - real people with some depth - have a negative view of homelessness: e.g. they assert it doesn't concern them directly, the government should deal with it and charities are there to help. The other two/three characters hold a different view: they have been homeless or they work with homeless people or they have been affected by it.

The group is at a meeting to discuss the future of a patch of woodland in their community, on which some people would like to build houses.

Enter the stranger. The stranger should be either the teacher in role as someone on one side or the other, or a video clip of an 'expert'. This stranger brings in new information and perspective that has to be absorbed into the devising process.

Share and show all groups in turn, this time without further intervention.

### Plenary and discussion (10 mins)

What has this session added to our knowledge and understanding of the forum technique? Does having a real-life issue make a difference to the drama and why? Does the fact that intervention came from an 'expert' add weight to the information?

### Resources for teachers:

- ▶ *The Big Issue* newspaper, widely available on the main streets of towns and cities
- ▶ *How Audience Characteristics Can Affect Communications*; useful focus on how different audiences respond and why  
<http://www.helpyouremployeeshealth.com/using-the-materials/how-to-use-the-materials/identify-your-communication-goals/how-audience-characteristics-can-affect-communications>
- ▶ Theatre Database: *The Psychology of Theatre Audiences*  
[http://www.theatredatabase.com/19th\\_century/psychology\\_of\\_theatre\\_audiences.html](http://www.theatredatabase.com/19th_century/psychology_of_theatre_audiences.html)

### Theatre in Education

This is a device whereby the teacher is an integral part of the action, often with little or no preparation, and supports groups struggling to devise and/or perform. If students understand that the teacher is adopting a series of different roles at different times, he/she can be the equivalent of an audience member going into a scene with characters' varied and challenging life experiences.

### Inclusion and challenge

It is often useful to pair up a stronger and a less able student to create a part of a scene, or hold a shared view which stretches and challenges both in different ways.

### Homework/follow up

Research to find out all you can about Augusto Boal.

## Session 5: Deliver the message

### Learning objectives

By the end of this session students will have:

- ▶ Explored the flexibility of characters through improvisation
- ▶ Developed collaborative devising techniques
- ▶ Improved their skills in performing characters
- ▶ Studied some ideas behind Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed.

### Warm-up (10 mins)

In solos or pairs, tell a story about a person caught up in some misfortune: victim of crime, misunderstanding, homelessness, war and conflict, race or age-related prejudice.

Share some and comment on each as: a) a performance; b) a piece of thought-provoking informative drama.

### Discussion/questions and new learning (10 mins)

Augusto Boal is generally credited with developing forum theatre in the 1970s. He called it Theatre of the Oppressed, as he wanted his theatre company to empower his audiences and address contemporary political issues.

An audience witnesses a short drama in which one or more ordinary people meet an obstacle or oppression that cannot be overcome. The audience is invited to suggest ways around it in a dramatic context. They bring experience of life to the situation that is of value in arriving at a solution.

They might get on stage and suggest replacements, new plots, and new characters along the lines with which we have experimented in these sessions. Therefore, the spectator has become the 'spect-actor' himself or herself.

### Development (40 mins)

In groups of 4/5, devise a scene of about 5 minutes which does two things: a) Deals with an issue such as homelessness, unemployment/training, travellers, immigrants, racial prejudice, old age; the NHS or benefits; and b) Has distinct characters for every performer in each group.

You may multi-role, but your plot will need to come up against an obstacle that will need audience help.

Imagine your audience will be people who have experienced first-hand whatever your chosen issue is.

This work will not be shared this session.

### Resources for teachers/students:

- ▶ TES Resources; ready-made slide show on history and purpose of Boal's forum theatre; teachers have to sign up, but it's free and well worth it for drama resources  
<https://www.tes.com/teaching-resource/forum-theatre-3001158>
- ▶ Brecht Forum Archive on Boal and Theatre of the Oppressed  
<http://brechtforum.org/abouttop>
- ▶ Biography and pedagogy of Boal  
<http://ptoweb.org/aboutpto/a-brief-biography-of-augusto-boal/>

### Theatre of the Oppressed and Boal

Actors start with everyday situations, urge audience to intervene/stop action, enact own ideas, replace actors. This closes the gap between actor and spectator to make a theatrical experience into a self-empowering process for the audience.

### Values and goals

These include - trust, spontaneity and creativity, collaboration, listening and awareness, communication, effective interaction, information collection, problem-solving and community development.

### Political theatre

Many centres use political theatre at GCSE to encourage learners to explore drama that touches on human, personal, emotional, governmental and economic situations and often conveys a message. Forum theatre and Boal aids that study, but also stands alone as a drama technique without the political angle.

### Homework/follow up

Review the work of your group to date and be prepared to make suggestions for improvement. Ask in particular if you are doing enough in the piece if you are being assessed on your contribution to a group performance.

## Session 6: Testing the theories

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### Learning objectives

By the end of this lesson students will have:

- ▶ Presented their prepared piece, taken developmental comment from peers and applied to the evolving drama
- ▶ Learned how to convey a message on a particular issue to an audience
- ▶ Explored collaborative group work's place in devised drama
- ▶ Studied some of the theories of Augusto Boal.

### Warm-up (10 mins)

Recap on the purpose of this session: to share and develop the group pieces on a current issue and adapt it through forum theatre. Revise and rehearse the group pieces started last session.

### Sharing and developing the pieces (40 mins)

Every group in turn shows their piece and then repeats with audience invited or volunteering changes, suggestions, ways of overcoming the obstacles. Teachers will judge how many developments and suggestions per group are appropriate given time constraints.

### Plenary and discussion (10 mins)

Summarise the learning about forum theatre in general and Boal in particular. Is it a technique that can be employed in other drama sessions and why? Has it helped the development of rounded characters and new plot/story ideas?

# RESOURCES

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## Student Character Questionnaire Appendix (Session 1)

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1. How old is your character?
2. At that age, describe the place you live.
3. Describe your physical appearance.
4. What are you afraid of? Most proud of?
5. Who lives with you?
6. How is money to live on brought in?
7. Do you support anyone else or is there someone who supports you?
8. Are you in a relationship?
9. Who did you have relationships with previously?
10. How do you get on with your parents now? Or with older people?
11. How do you get on with children/younger people?
12. Do you have children or are you a child?
13. Tell us about your siblings, if you have any.
14. What are your ambitions for next year? In five years? In ten years?
15. What is your favourite TV programme, favourite food, favourite music and why?
16. What is your most disliked TV programme, food, music and why?
17. Tell us your response to sport? Politics? Pensions?
18. What do you do for others? (Charities? Caring?)
19. What would people say of you if you were to die tomorrow?
20. What would you most like to be remembered for?
21. What is one thing you'd do differently in life given a chance?