



**General Certificate of Education**

**Drama and Theatre Studies 1241**

**Unit 1A Live Theatre Production Seen**

**Report on the Examination**

*2010 examination - June series*

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## Unit 1A – Live Theatre Production Seen

### *General*

As teachers and students become more aware of the style of questions in this section of the examination, examiners were able to report an improved confidence amongst candidates in meeting the precise demands of the question, with many more candidates recognising the question focus relating this to particular moments from the production and including an element of assessment or evaluation. These three key areas continue to make up the structure of all questions in this section, and it was evident from many of the attached notes that candidates had been encouraged to consider each of these elements after seeing the productions. However, examiners did report that in terms of assessment and evaluation weaker responses, whilst often being written with great and often repetitive zeal, failed to provide the necessary analysis to support their assertions.

It was apparent from the range of productions used and the questions answered that many candidates are enthused by the work they have seen and are eager to express this to the examiner. Examiners reported seeing work from across the spectrum of live theatre with responses that included reference to large and small scale productions, amateur and professional, serious, comic and musical. Generally speaking, most candidates chose appropriate productions to write about, with many of them offering opportunities to approach them from a range of different angles. Productions by Kneehigh, Frantic Assembly, *The Woman in Black* and *The 39 Steps* continue to be very popular with the addition of *War Horse* this year. It was also very encouraging to see candidates opting to write about less well known productions with some very interesting analyses of experimental or site-specific work.

Examiners also reported that many candidates provided a clear, and in some cases very detailed and focused, introductory paragraph that revealed helpful and clear understanding of the production and of its theatrical aims. The recommendation in the specification that background research has been undertaken appears to be being considered in far more detail than in the previous two sessions. This was particularly evident where candidates were writing about a production from a company whose work could be clearly defined in terms of its style e.g. Frantic Assembly or Kneehigh. However, introductory paragraphs were sometimes written in far too much detail thereby not allowing candidates sufficient time to really get to grips with the most important elements of the question and to provide detailed analysis of what they had actually witnessed in the production. Similarly, weaker responses failed to demonstrate how these theatrical aims or intentions were revealed in the examples from the production.

Although many examiners reported seeing some very detailed and usefully constructed notes, with many candidates adopting a grid structure that clearly allowed them to focus their thoughts on specific production and performance elements, there were still many occasions where candidates were clearly very poorly equipped with no more than a few lines about one production. This does not suggest sufficient preparation and, as the questions are designed to require more than a vague memory of something seen, possibly many months previously, the notes should be considered a necessity and not a luxury! In instances where the candidate had only included notes on one production, these often tended to be very generalised, giving the impression that the candidate was determined to write about that one production regardless of the specific focus of the question. Whilst the range of questions on the paper does allow candidates to write about anything seen, the precise focus required does necessitate a degree of selectivity, and candidates should not assume the inclusion of a particular theatrical focus. This was particularly evident where candidates had clearly been hoping for a question on set design, and proceeded to try and fit their ideas on this into the question on lighting. In order to allow candidates the best possible access to the full range of questions, teachers should

continue to note the recommendation in the specification that candidates should see 'a range of different styles of theatre'.

One area of preparation which might be further considered by teachers was that of the candidate who writes about a production they have seen independently. Whilst this is clearly to be encouraged as a way of candidates broadening their experience of theatre, and many wrote with particular enthusiasm, there were obvious cases where these candidates had not had the same level of guidance in preparing their notes or assessing the experience.

With regard to candidates' understanding and explanation of style, it is important that they do not assume examiners' prior knowledge; the need for clarity of expression is vital in communicating a clear vision of the production seen – this is particularly worth mentioning where candidates have failed to clearly explain the use of a puppet within a production. Whilst it is obvious that the horses and goose were puppets in *War Horse* it was less so considering the children in productions of *Caucasian Chalk Circle* and *Brief Encounter*.

In terms of rubric, examiners still reported some instances of candidates failing to include the date and venue of the production (and in a couple of notable cases, the title of it). More candidates appear to have paid heed to the advice that sketches and diagrams should be used but there were still many cases where this was not the case, and this clearly hindered their ability to successfully communicate their understanding of design issues. Finally, the most successful responses revealed candidates' evident engagement with live theatre, and at their best made the examiner want to see the production!

### **Question 1**

This was the more popular of the two design questions, with a reasonably wide range of productions used to support the response. On the whole the choice of production was usually apt, with most candidates at least recognising the need to write about the creation or change of mood or atmosphere. For the most part candidates were able to offer some discussion about different lighting states and the way in which they contributed to the creation or change of mood and atmosphere.

It was particularly noticeable where candidates had considered the detail of lighting before they entered the examination room; these responses showed impressive insight into the function of the lighting designer, and were often related to large scale productions, sometimes musicals, because in these, the effects appear to be the most noticeable and memorable. In some instances candidates had chosen to answer this question apparently on the basis of remembering one specific moment or lighting effect. This clearly fails to provide them with enough detail to be able to sufficiently meet the demands of the question. Where the lighting effects were more subtle in creating or changing mood, it was very apparent where candidates didn't have sufficient technical knowledge to be able to write convincingly about the creation of the effects. Candidates who could only recognise when a coloured gel or a gobo was used were frequently quite restricted in their analysis. Similarly, those that chose to write about a production that took place in a small studio space with a narrow range of lanterns had to be able to discuss, for example, levels, angles and edges in order to offer sufficient detail. Unfortunately, this was rarely the case, with many candidates revealing their lack of technical knowledge when attempting to somewhat unconvincingly explain that the whole stage was lit by one spotlight or that large sections of the production were lit by a purely red wash.

On a more positive note, many candidates were able to explain how the use of lighting and gauzes could be used to create tension (as in *Woman in Black*) or to shift the mood through use of colour and intensity (as in the sepia warm tones at the start of *War Horse* to the harsh blue

and open light of the war scenes). Some candidates offered the names of various types of lanterns but without fully demonstrating their use or effect, and many resorted to very generalised discussions of colour and blackout. Few candidates thought to include a sketch. These were at their most useful when identifying either how the lighting worked in conjunction with the set or revealing information about angle and direction.

At their best, responses to this question demonstrated evident knowledge and understanding of lighting design fundamentals, coupled with a clear appreciation of how these can be used to create or change the mood and atmosphere; at their least successful candidates resorted to stating that the light was either merely 'light' or 'dark' or 'minimalistic'.

## **Question 2**

This was the least attempted question on the paper but examiners reported that many of the candidates who did choose it provided good details of the costumes and their use in communicating the message of the play. Choice of production was crucial here, the most successful being those where the costume design allowed the candidates to address specific details. Productions such as *Pride and Prejudice* where the candidate could identify and explain the regency detail of a range of costumes for both male and female characters and then relate this to social class and manners during a particular moment – for example the ball, were often the most successful.

Although most candidates attempting this question were at least able to describe to a greater or lesser extent the costumes being worn by the performers, many failed to sufficiently address the central focus of the question in enough detail. Productions that dealt with social class (*Blood Brothers*, *Threepenny Opera*) were often popular choices with the candidates recognising that the costume design was intended to reveal something of this but not really sufficiently getting to grips with how this was achieved. Candidates' use of notes was essential here, with the inclusion of pre-drawn sketches and use of specialist terminology really helping to convey the candidates' understanding of the role of the costume designer. It is important to point out here that it is an infringement of the rubric to include downloaded/photocopied images within the candidates' notes.

Kneehigh productions continue to be popular with design questions and although using relatively modern costumes, the choice of items and the care with accessories helped to present themes and messages which were clearly related to the production as a whole. Other effective choices were often ones which clearly related to plays which the candidate knew well and was therefore able to recognise the subtlety of the design.

Given the primary focus of the question to consider the conveying of theme or message, it proved somewhat limiting where a candidate mentioned only one or two costumes rather than considering the design as a whole. In a production with a large cast there are likely to be design concepts which inform the costuming of groups as well as individuals – where candidates recognised this, the effectiveness of their response was generally enhanced.

There were some unwise choices of production here with candidates attempting to discuss how a group of actors in black was intended to create a neutral impression. Any discussion of theme or message was therefore limited, however much the symbolism of the colour black was considered.

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**Question 3**

This was a popular question which, because of its flexible nature, enabled the candidates to write about a very broad range of productions. This flexibility encouraged some very strong responses, with candidates confidently discussing two or more performers especially in productions that were broadly naturalistic, *A Doll's House*, *Death of a Salesman* and *Macbeth* being very popular. Here it was possible for candidates to take two or three very specific moments and really exploit the detail of the performances focussing in on precise explanations of the vocal and physical delivery of the text. Once again the more familiar the candidates were with the work and the more they were able to use notes that did contain the detail of the performers' work, the more effective their responses were. Stronger responses, sometimes from candidates who wrote quite simply, often revealed an understanding of the contrast between the selected characters, and where this was the case the candidates appeared to find it easier to consider the way in which the audience were being affected, with them feeling, for example, sympathy for Linda and anger at Willy in *Death of a Salesman*. Examiners also noted though that some potential was lost if the same roles were repeated over several moments where the nature of the performers' collaboration was essentially the same.

Strong responses were not limited to naturalistic work; examiners reported seeing some very detailed answers where candidates had chosen productions of physical theatre work where the performers had to support each other, sometimes quite literally. Analysis of moments in *Caucasian Chalk Circle* such as the creation of the rope bridge, the river and the dialogue addressed across it, the packing of the Governor's Wife's belongings and the chalk circle scene all had the potential to demonstrate how the intended effect for the audience is dependent on the interaction between a group of performers, and not just the delivery of a section of text by two individuals. The best answers were those that fully understood the term collaboration, and gave equal consideration to the way in which the 'non-speaking' performer responded to the speaker, thus acknowledging that theatre is a group activity.

Weaker responses spent an inordinate amount of time on character description, failing to explain how the performer revealed the traits; or, although identifying specific moments in the production, failed to explore these where the performers worked together, writing about separate moments for each performer. Finally, the inclusion of candidates' assessment of success revealed a range of understanding of this concept, with some candidates offering truly analytical assessments precisely linked to the examples proffered. Others merely relied on assertion.

**Question 4**

This was by far the most popular question on the paper. However, there were many occasions where examiners reported that they felt candidates would have achieved more had they used the same production, but answered on Question 3.

The very specific focus of discussing movement and physical skills appeared to have been missed by quite a large number of candidates who treated this as a general performance based question, the result being that their answers moved in and out of focus and often contained lengthy sections which dealt exclusively with the performers' vocal skills. Here the candidates appeared to stick doggedly to their notes, failing to select. However, some responses did produce a vivid description of physical skills with some sophisticated analysis of how this engaged the audience. The most popular choice of production here appeared to be *War Horse*, focussing on the ensemble sections, and Albert and his mother, rather than those with the puppets. Many candidates who did attempt to discuss the puppeteers struggled to find

sufficient precise details about what they did to control the horses, and these answers often became very generalised and narrative based.

Focused answers had limited character description but maintained the detail in relation to particular moments demonstrating an awareness of the full range of possible areas to cover, facial expression, gesture, gait, posture, use of space, interaction with one another and with costume, accessories and props. Some candidates took productions such as *Woman in Black* and *39 Steps*, and focussed quite precisely on the creation of a range of characters explaining why these were engaging for the audience. However, analysis of audience engagement was probably the least successful element of the answers with weaker ones either ignoring it completely or relying on assertion without the necessary analysis to back it up, whilst some candidates discussed what the audience saw rather than how they were engaged by it.

Examiners also reported that there was a very broad range seen as to what constitutes movement and physical skills, with the weaker responses providing somewhat limited analysis and very straightforward description of the performers' work; he 'moved slowly', 'she rushed about quickly' with more sophisticated ones much more vividly bringing to life the performers' work through developed description.

It is also worth noting that, the question called for an explanation of the performers: in a minority of cases candidates only wrote about one performer.

### **Mark Ranges and Award of Grades**

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