



**General Certificate of Education (A-level)
June 2011**

Drama and Theatre Studies

DRAM4

(Specification 2240)

Unit 4: Presentation of Devised Drama

Report on the Examination

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DRAM4: Presentation of Devised Drama

Administration

The same administrative points as were made in the AS report also apply here. It is extremely important that teachers familiarise themselves with the moderation procedures and the requirements of this part of the specification.

The majority of teachers had done this by having complete command of the specification requirements and accompanying guidance notes, attending standardisation meetings and contacting their Coursework Adviser for points of clarification.

It is pleasing to report that most centres adhered to all the administrative deadlines and requirements and had organised the moderation session appropriately.

Candidates are encouraged to have audiences present for their presentations in order to consider their work more fully in a theatrical context. There were times when groups did perform in a vast school hall with only the teacher and the moderator present, which was a bit dispiriting for them.

General comments

This examination requires that candidates, working in a group, devise a piece of theatre in a selected performance style, which demonstrates their knowledge, understanding and practical competence in incorporating features of that style into their piece.

This examination is not about revealing understanding of the work of a single practitioner - as at AS. Some candidates this year had been led to believe that A2 was merely a re-run of the AS demands except that A2 work is devised where AS work was related to a scripted text. This fundamental misunderstanding lost some candidates many marks.

Candidates are expected to research their chosen style both by seeing live productions in that style (it is a requirement that they refer to at least one live production in their Supporting Notes) and by reading plays written in their chosen style and/or critical material about their chosen style.

Choosing a suitable performance style and then gaining appropriate knowledge and understanding about it are the keys to success in this unit.

The majority of candidates selected an appropriate style and fulfilled the requirements of the examination. Some had been poorly advised and selected styles that were too nebulous to access as well as to assess, for example, 'post modernism'.

Others seemed to hedge their bets and in extreme cases groups appeared to have devised a whole piece and then tried to work out what style they should call it afterwards.

Supporting Notes

The Supporting Notes are candidates' personal records of the devising process that should meet the published criteria and be written independently by each member of a group; they are assessed individually. Therefore, while it is expected that groups will share their dramatic intentions for an audience and indeed will have shared all the practical work done in preparation for the performance, they should be expressing their intentions and explaining the process in their own words in their own notes.

Occasionally, moderators were surprised to see the same words and phrases replicated throughout the notes for a whole group. This was particularly noticeable in the weaker work when the register suddenly changed to a paragraph apparently written in collusion with others. Teachers do need to monitor this to prevent any potential for suspected malpractice; such suspicion results in all Supporting Notes being taken away from the centre by the moderator to be scrutinised by the malpractice department at AQA.

Please remind candidates that the individual requirements of specific sections of the A2 Notes differ, section by section, from the demands of the AS Notes.

Section 1

In order to achieve high marks for this section, candidates need to be able to explain precisely what their dramatic intentions **for the audience** are, given their chosen content and performance style.

The best candidates, therefore, justify their choice of style in relation to these intentions. Having established this justification they then go on to give a detailed analysis of what they have seen live and read in the chosen style; establishing, with clarity and some authority, the key features and methods of that style.

Good candidates drew on wide experience of the selected style as evidenced in a comprehensive list of productions seen and/or in their webliography/ bibliography.

Features of weaker work were as follows:

- no reference to live theatre
- reference to live theatre **not** in the chosen style
- reference to live theatre but no key features, methods or techniques picked out
- dramatic intentions stated without reference to the intended audience experience
- no justification for choosing their style, just a statement that they were doing it
- reference to films or dance pieces at the expense of reference to live theatre.

Section 2

In this section candidates are expected to explain how they have developed their piece from scratch. Good work explained precisely what they had researched in terms of their content and how they had incorporated that research into the piece. They referred to devising strategies, to the development of the piece through experiment and rehearsal and how they had refined their work in response to feedback.

Having read a successful Section 2, moderators had a sense of the theatrical process the candidate had undertaken and had a clear sense of what they were about to see.

Features of weaker work were as follows:

- lack of reference to devising strategies
- lack of understanding of what constitutes a devising strategy
- descriptions of rehearsals only
- writing about warm ups rather than devising/rehearsal techniques
- no reference to changes made in light of feedback
- no reference to style.

Section 3

In this section candidates have to assess the effectiveness of the piece they have created in terms of their selected style; they need to assess the development of their own skill and address specific health and safety issues in terms of the work.

Features of weaker work were as follows:

- the piece not assessed at all
- writing about rehearsals (unlike DRAM2 this is not a requirement in this section)
- no reference to style
- a somewhat self-satisfied assessment, un-related to style
- no reference to vocal and/or physical skills in acting notes
- misunderstanding of what is meant by acting skills
- over-long health and safety at the expense of detailed assessment of the piece/skill.

Presentations

A very wide range of theatrical styles was seen this year by moderators, but the most popular, by far, was creative adaptation in a storytelling style. Also popular were physical, epic and docu-drama styles. In good work, pieces were clearly rooted in the groups' experiences of these styles seen at the theatre as they clearly emulated the techniques and methods used by professional companies. The selected style also permeated everything that the group presented on stage so that all theatrical elements and devices were thoroughly integrated.

A wide range of topics were also evident, ranging from familiar 'teenage' issues to mass murderers, invasion by aliens, feminist issues, clinical experiments and episodes from history. Where groups had done the necessary research and taken on board all the devices needed to create the appropriate context for their piece these were often very successful.

Creative adaptation stimulated the interest of many candidates once they had found a suitable text to adapt. The skill lies not only in the adapting but in the selection of material to adapt. Successful choices included aspects of larger novels or short stories rather than attempting *War and Peace* in twenty minutes but there were also examples of over-slight work being selected, for example, song lyrics or storybooks written for babies and toddlers.

The most successful groups showed an ability to select their material with care and integrity and a ruthless will to reject what was unnecessary.

The more creative presentations showed a strong unity of purpose arising from a positive group dynamic. The range of skills was well-balanced and the work was cogent and disciplined resulting in some very exciting and moving presentations.

Weaker candidates revealed looseness in their structures. This was often the product of simplistic thinking about the demands of their chosen styles, for example, some of the naturalistic work lacked depth and truth of characterisation; physically driven work lacked inventive variety and became repetitious; some candidates were unclear about the styles they were using.

The majority of the presentations that were seen were in an end-on configuration. Some groups placed members of the audience within their acting space but this was often a token gesture based on the need to 'shock' or interact with audience members.

Nevertheless, there was also some very adventurous work seen. One group adapted a text of Hitchcock's *Psycho* which was set in a real fire-damaged hotel. The compact audience was ushered by a 'tour guide' from room to room to witness the unfolding story; the climax of the piece taking place in a bathroom, leading off the room where the audience was assembled but enabling them to glimpse through the open door the steamed-up mirror and to hear the blood curdling cry of the victim, before 'Norman Bates' emerged, covered in blood.

More naturalistic pieces were also successful in the hands of committed candidates with a facility for language/dialogue. Some groups appreciate that they did not necessarily need a box set as a setting for their piece of naturalism provided that they could create an authentic experience for their audience through a carefully structured script, finely detailed costuming and use of authentic props within a more neutral setting.

Good groups always paid attention to the overall look of their work and fully considered how the use of space and visual elements help to create meaning for an audience. The best work clearly had an overall design concept.

For example one piece of docu-drama about an American boy who had killed his family, had used black and white projections, black and white moving film, black and white costumes and even black and white props to create the period and locale. When they created still images from the murder scene it made it seem like they too were part of the projections with a seamless effect. This was indeed a chilling piece with a measured cool acting style and a quiet intensity throughout only broken by the piercing gunshot sounds at the end. Even when the audience had known from the beginning how the story would end, because the group had showed enormous restraint in their playing up to that point, the shots came as a shocking surprise.

Given how many candidates had seen Kneehigh's *Hansel and Gretel* and *The Red Shoes* it was not surprising that there were a huge number of fairy tales seen which used a storytelling style. However, not all of these were successful.

Sometimes the characters lacked development and effectiveness. Sometimes a group seemed to believe that the use of a glove puppet, in itself, indicated that they had assimilated the fairy-tale, story-telling style.

Good groups had noted that a feature of such work is colourful costuming and inventive use of props. In one imaginative rendition of *The Tin Soldier* the group had amusingly worn saggy, white long johns when performing as the toys and appropriate, period military jackets when performing as the soldiers. These candidates created a 'hen' out of a bunch of feathers, which, when accompanied by the actor's squawking, added comedy to an already ingenious piece. Transitions were seamless - another feature of good work in this style.

While there was some very good work seen this year, less successful groups only embraced their chosen style in a cursory fashion.

One of the most pervasive pieces of evidence of misunderstanding of theatrical style seen this year was in candidates' decisions to adopt a very neutral presentation style with minimum props and a 'uniform' of black leggings and T shirts, regardless of the style that the group were meant to be using.

Given that it is highly unlikely that groups will have seen any actors on the professional stage looking like this, such carelessness about the look of the piece is an indication of a lack of imagination and lack of understanding of how different theatre elements contribute to the whole effect for an audience. Similarly, on occasions, candidates appeared without shoes, even though they were attempting naturalistic drama.

Other groups had given no indication of period, locale or context in anything they presented. In the case of docu-drama this is especially important if any degree of theatrical veracity is to be witnessed. To choose a true story clearly set in the United States and not use the right accent just confuses an audience and renders the work unbelievable in an instant.

One group had chosen to tell the story of the Papin sisters in 1930's France but not one item of clothing worn by the candidates indicated the period or social milieu at all.

Other weaknesses, in quasi-naturalistic pieces, included superficial scripting and the lack of ability to use linguistic registers to define characters. Sometimes the overall structure of the piece was formulaic with each of the acting candidates taking it in 'turns' to do a monologue or be the central focus in a scene. This predictability factor is rarely a positive feature.

The physical sequences in some 'physical theatre' presentations were more akin to pop videos than to theatrical movement sequences and were often driven by the music to the extent that they were over-long and/or self-indulgent, thus weakening their overall impact.

In addition to this, sometimes, the candidates tried to speak over their strenuous physical sequences resulting in poor articulation and a very breathless delivery. Alternatively, the audience could not hear what was being said at all because the music was too loud.

Over-long and frequent transitions were another feature of weak work. Sometimes the blackouts were longer than the intervening scenes and were a further indication of a group's inability to structure their work theatrically or to develop a scene beyond a few seconds.

Directing

While there were one or two effective candidates for this skill, it was difficult to detect in the majority what precisely they had contributed to the presentation. Where candidates had written clear Supporting Notes explaining their artistic decisions and had provided a final annotated script as well as a prompt copy it was easier to tell what they had done prior to the presentation.

These candidates had to bear responsibility for the overall staging of the work and, on many occasions, poorly integrated use of music, projections and use of the space by the actors prevented high marks from being awarded.

It was occasionally evident from the Supporting Notes of directing candidates that they had had to deal with unresolvable conflicts in rehearsals and had at times assumed an authoritarian approach to directing; often reflected upon in the notes from the rest of the group! Candidates are therefore only recommended to offer this skill if they can match good knowledge of directing methods with an appropriate level of sensitivity and maturity. Books by Max Stafford Clark and Katie Mitchell would seem to be 'compulsory' reading about the art

of directing, regardless of the style of theatre to be used.

Acting

This was the predominant skill and, as usual, there was a wide range of ability and achievement.

At the top end of the scale, there was always the sense of a highly organised collective at work that communicated the imaginative material in a disciplined way that fully engaged the audiences who reciprocated with total attention.

Some extremely thoughtful and moving ideas were explored in productions such as *Burning Curiosity*, a creative adaptation of the 'Alice' stories that explored Charles Dodson's ambiguous relationship with children using a theatre of cruelty style. This showed a high degree of ensemble playing that communicated ideas to make the audience ponder their significance.

There was another creative adaptation *Edgar* that explored the relationship of Poe with the women in his life and literature. This contained a dazzling array of skills including live music and absolute precision of movement.

The Magdalene Sisters was a very moving exploration of the events in Ireland using well-crafted dialogue supplemented by a discrete range of physical skills that heightened the action in subtle ways.

Another excellent example was a physical theatre presentation based on Oliver Sachs' book *Awakenings* in which the predicament of patients suffering from encephalitis lethargica was explored with simple skills in a most poignant way.

These were highly effective examples of devised work constructed and performed at a very high level using a wide variety of skills and creating memorable experiences for their audiences.

Less strong candidates showed some uneven qualities in their work. Sometimes this arose from a wide range of ability in the candidates or a lack of cohesion within the groups. In some cases the latter aspect was recorded in the preparation marks by the teacher and these suggested a limited work rate of some members.

In other groups within this category there were limitations in the structure of their work, lack of invention, limited use of stage space, a simplistic understanding of the demands of their chosen style and/or only a tenuous grasp of performance skills. Vocal and physical skills were acceptable and not always consistent with the group aims. In some examples, there was clearly a restricted creativity that only touched the chosen style occasionally.

The very best actors were often in the very best work offered by the whole group and there were a number of exciting and convincing performances seen this year. Obviously to be able to demonstrate excellent acting skills, candidates have to give themselves something good to act first and occasionally moderators were aware that candidates were hampered by poor, implausible scripting.

Good candidates always used an appropriate vocal register, pitch, tone and accent to communicate what they were saying in a way that made the audience want to listen to them. This was matched by the precise application of physical skills making every move count, as was the case from a young actor in an expressionist re-telling of a Borges story where even

the raising of an eyebrow meant something. Some candidates also revealed skilful timing of responses to others on stage.

There were also examples of some excellent singing and playing of instruments along with versatile multi role playing with every character precisely defined through the application of different vocal tones, physical 'ticks' and levels of energy so that they seemed to be transforming themselves before our very eyes.

Weaker candidates failed to apply the correct acting style to their work, such as too much under playing in naturalistic pieces, quite forgetting that their performance has to reach across the space to the auditorium. Others who employed direct address did not actually look at the audience at all but gazed vaguely into the space above them.

Some candidates looked clumsy and there were some very poorly executed instances of kissing and violence on stage. Given that this work is actually written and devised by the candidates themselves it is somewhat surprising that they try to do things they are not comfortable with or have the skills to apply to their own text.

Some of the mime work seen was also weak, especially when a group had decided for some reason known only to themselves to mime most of their props whilst retaining others. If a group had selected physical theatre but one of the group had weak physical co-ordination this not only highlighted their discomfort and poor skills but also weakened the whole ensemble effect.

Mask Design

Too few masks were seen at this level to be able to make a meaningful report on the skill.

Set Design

As in the case of directing this is not such a popular skill at this level and many of the same comments about what was seen have already been made in the DRAM2 report. Suffice it to say that the best candidates produced a set that was clearly in the style of the rest of the group and was a practical one for the actors to use, rather than just providing a backdrop for them to act against. Those who had created an epic style set seemed to be generally successful, provided they had remembered that the set itself needs to make a dialectical statement to the audience too. Projections and live feed film were also more prevalent this year, probably as the result of work the candidate had seen in the theatre. However, if a candidate wishes to offer this skill, centres need to sure they can provide the wherewithal to meet the artistic decisions of the designer.

Costume Design

This skill continues to grow in popularity and, as with all other skills, where what was offered was in keeping with the selected style they were more likely to be successful. It is worth reminding candidates that they are required to make from scratch **one** complete costume and oversee the assembly of the others. Candidates who just make minor adaptations to already existing costumes are unlikely to achieve high marks as they have not made a whole costume. For example, some candidates had merely made ties or waistcoats for the actors to wear.

Those candidates who had dressed a piece set in another period or exotic location were often given more opportunity to create something exciting than those who were costuming a contemporary piece set in the here and now. One costume candidate created the costumes for a theatre of cruelty piece set in sweatshops in the Far East, thus giving them the opportunity to create an exciting range of costumes including distressing techniques for the workers' costumes.

The best candidates had made sure that they had considered the whole look of their costumes and had demonstrated attention to detail in the selection of accessories, jewellery, hairstyles, handbags and footwear. It was also clear that the costumes had been made early enough for changes to be made if necessary and that the actors had got used to wearing them for some time before the examination date. The weakest work did not fit the actor it had been made for and there were examples of trailing hems, unsightly bra straps, inappropriate foundation garments and costumes actually falling apart as the result of an actor's movement.

Technical Elements

This is another skill gaining in popularity at this level, and when applied to styles such as surrealism, theatre of cruelty, and expressionism, greatly enhanced the look of the piece. Candidates working in naturalism or epic theatre find it harder; the former because it is very difficult to light something naturalistically without recourse to a large number of lanterns and a range of coloured gels and the latter because if they are to truly stick to the style they will be unable to reveal much skill in colour mixing.

There were some beautifully lit pieces where the light had the effect of being a definite presence on stage. Good candidates had made sure that the actors were lit and could actually be seen, first and foremost.

They used a range of differently angled lights and ensured there were no overlapping shadows where these were not intended, usually by adding some back lighting.

Others used up-lighting to create vast silhouettes on the cyclorama or only lit the actors from one side to create interesting shadows when the actors were creating a menacing scene.

Good candidates working in expressionist style had realised that a feature of expressionist plays is often the clashing use of colours from spectrum opposites and so they clashed turquoise with orange to create a nightmare look. Good candidates never resorted to cliché and avoided strobes and obvious colours such as red for danger and murder.

Many candidates chose to offer both lighting and sound but were better in one skill than in the other. One such candidate was the one who provided the technical elements for the above mentioned sweat shop piece. Whilst his actors sometimes disappeared unintentionally into the dark, his use of sound was sophisticated. For example, his use of the sound of constant dripping helped to create the humid atmosphere as well as a sense of foreboding for the audience. He had composed music especially to heighten the tension and all the cues and volume levels were precisely timed.

Weaker work was characterised by limited invention, areas of the stage not being lit and music played at one level all the way through, often so the actors could not be heard.

As with set design candidates, the artistic endeavours of candidates offering these skills will be limited if the range of equipment available to them is limited.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results Statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.

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