



General Certificate of Education

Drama and Theatre Studies 1241

Unit 1B Prescribed Play

Report on the Examination

2010 examination - January series

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Unit 1B – Prescribed Play

General

Examiners reported seeing responses across the full range of texts, possibly more evenly distributed than in June 2009. The most popular texts however continue to be *Antigone*, *A Doll's House* and *The Shadow of a Gunman*, although it would appear that both *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Oh What a Lovely War* are gaining in popularity.

Generally speaking, candidates wrote reasonably structured responses which revealed at least some knowledge of their chosen text. Understanding of the text and the precise demands of the question was often revealed by the amount of close reference to it in the candidates' responses. However, the problem with page references being used in texts which have various editions (and translations) was no better than indicated in previous examiners' reports and in some cases appeared to be worse. Teachers are reminded that when preparing candidates for this examination they need to alert them to the fact that close reference to the text is expected and indeed that without it, candidates' responses are likely to be very generalised, therefore not fulfilling the demands of the question. The actual reference to the text also needs to be of sufficient length for the examiner to be able to locate it and not, as was the case from some candidates, a couple of words from the middle of a speech.

There appeared to be a greater awareness of the need to make precise and purposeful reference to the plays' genre or style and many more candidates seemed to address this fact, using this to help their response. In the best cases, these references were used explicitly throughout the answer to help explain the candidates' practical ideas. Some candidates however still tried to dismiss this requirement in the opening paragraph without making it directly focused on the question; alternatively, they gave a stock answer which set the play in its context but then contradicted these references in the rest of the answer.

Performance-based questions continue to be the most popular and the trend for considering physical representations without sufficient reference to the delivery of dialogue appears to be decreasing. This is promising as it is this synthesis of all performance skills that allows the candidate to fully engage with and communicate their understanding of the character in performance.

Overly pre-prepared details on the plays' themes, setting and casting were generally unhelpful and frequently off-focus; also, although it is hoped that candidates will have worked through the play practically in their centres, there were examples where all the responses from one centre would offer exactly the same directorial or performance points for the specified character at exactly the same points in the text. In itself this is not necessarily problematic. However, where this was the case, particularly in answers from less able candidates, it appeared that they did not fully understand either the text or the ideas that they were putting forward.

Examiners reported seeing a worrying number of answers which addressed the wrong section of the play. In *Antigone*, several candidates answered on the Messenger, having called him the Messenger in the opening sentence but then proceeded to write

about the Sentry thereafter. The wrong section of *The Shadow of a Gunman* was used by some candidates, looking at Mrs Grigson's second entrance. The question on Dr Rank was sometimes answered with reference to Krogstad. Some answers on *Oh What a Lovely War* started earlier than the section set.

Time management is clearly a factor also – many responses only covered part of the required section with the opening being considered in repetitious detail, sometimes at the expense of there being no mention made of later sections. Candidates need to be made aware that they should select moments from across the whole specified section in order to ensure that they are fully meeting the demands of AO2. Similarly, many candidates only met part of the demands of the question without making sufficient reference to the precise focus required.

Examiners noted a significant number of answers which included assumptions about the rehearsal conditions in which the play had been studied. Candidates talked of the 'room' Creon enters and the way to create a Restoration costume with a long skirt and a scarf. It is far more helpful when candidates make suggestions as to how a full scale production could be staged. A limiting attitude was also shown in casting ideas (which were often offered whether requested or not) which often included comments like 'a voice that can be heard'.

Finally, although the texts seem to be generally well understood, there is frequently too much focus on a literary analysis of character and content at the expense of a theatrical perspective; this results in many examiner comments asking the candidate to extend or develop their ideas. However, where this was not the case, there were some very engaged and detailed responses where candidates thoughtfully addressed the precise demands of the question and enjoyed putting life into their individual interpretations of page to stage.

Antigone

Question 1(a)

This was the most popular question on *Antigone* and there were many good and accurate answers. Candidates' ideas for the actor's physical and vocal qualities were generally quite detailed and supported by appropriate reasoning, although in some cases candidates did make assertions about size and authority without actually stating how the performer will use this to create a presence on stage. Better responses looked at a range of apt possibilities related to character, status and the Greek setting, whilst weaker ones resorted to broader description, character points and/or costume description – a purple sash being popular. Others offered personalities as an option e.g. Hitler or Idi Amin; candidates should bear in mind, however, that if they are intending to present Creon in this way that this must be supported by reference to more than 'to make it more relevant'.

Most candidates considered Creon's first entrance in some detail, and although references to the overall staging of the scene were helpful in setting the context, many candidates focused too heavily on this at the expense of the performance by the actor.

Generally there was quite a good understanding of the role and most responses at least saw Creon in terms of his 'authority'. However, weaker answers lost sight of this with some suggestions for his behaviour with the Sentry suggesting a total lack of authority. There were some subtle answers though which reflected his new-found power and the potential for having to show strong or decisive leadership which, through clear performance suggestions such as a nervous cough or shuffling of papers, clearly conveyed his vulnerability alongside authority. Stronger responses took us through the whole section, carefully selecting key moments and using the text effectively. Weaker candidates were either too descriptive and/or did not get to the Sentry.

Most responses favoured a Greek setting which allowed apt references to various aspects of Greek Theatre or a more neutral modern one. In strong answers the Chorus was used purposefully. A few chose their own particular settings e.g. a barn, an SS office 1940, a gothic underground club 1960. Rarely were such choices developed in the subsequent answer or particularly helpful in maintaining the focus on authority.

Question 1(b)

Owing to the popularity of 1(a), this question was rarely answered. There were a few confident responses that recognised the heavy responsibility placed on the role of the Messenger and how this pressure could be conveyed through his description of the reported events and in his interaction with and concern for Eurydice. Generally candidates opted for a sympathetic response but some weaker candidates thought that the Messenger should have 'no expression' and be a 'neutral figure', which did not help performance detail and made it very difficult to elicit any kind of response to him. Some candidates recognised the traditional Greek characteristics of the Messenger's role but then went on to try to explain this in terms of updating him to a policeman or paramedic; whilst the intention might have been clear, there was rarely any sense of how this would be maintained throughout the section.

Similarly, many candidates failed to cover the whole section, focusing almost entirely on his entrance and the Chorus' response to him (rather than the audience's). Few gave any details for his speech re-telling the events whilst some did discuss his attitude towards Creon; however, again this tended to be his response to Creon rather than that of the audience.

As previously mentioned, some candidates misinterpreted the Messenger for the Sentry. Many candidates produced ideas that would have been more appropriate to a question on staging the section rather than on performing the role.

The Taming of the Shrew

Question 2(a)

Examiners reported seeing many really good answers to this question with a very good focus on the question and a genuine range of attitudes revealed from love to frustration to anger, with the majority of candidates settling on a favoured or positive interpretation regarding Baptista's relationship with Bianca and an irritated or angered one towards

Katherina. The most able were confident about expressing quite subtle shifts in Baptista's attitudes which helped to reveal a truly three-dimensional character.

Most candidates approached the role in a reasonably compatible way and responses were appropriately supported by the text. Some answers focused on a comic portrayal; some candidates, however, created such a draconian figure that it was hard to believe that the character would have allowed Katherina to become so independent.

The favouritism shown to Bianca was usually portrayed sensitively and with a range of performance details, although Katherina was often dealt with less precisely, perhaps because few lines are said directly to her. Most candidates covered the two scenes but many did this in an uneven way, often spending too long on the first introduction of the daughters and on Baptista's response to the striking hand at the start of Act 2, Scene 1. Many answers failed to give sufficient weight to the closing sections of the extract set and therefore relevant responses to Petruchio's interest in Katherina were often left unexplored.

Most candidates were confident about the period and genre but some took too much time considering aspects of Elizabethan theatre and/or the status of the sexes in the late 16th century at the expense of precise performance details.

Question 2(b)

Examiners reported seeing relatively few responses to this question but many of those who did answer it were clearly design-orientated candidates who enjoyed the opportunity to address this scene. The use by the actors of particular areas was quite inventive, although this sometimes went against the text e.g. having the women visible in their separate room needs careful indication of how this could work, as does the idea of them being at the back of the auditorium.

Where sketches were provided, they suggested some sightline problems with features placed on the table, obscuring some members of the cast from sections of the audience or they were impractical in terms of scale, movement, access or lack of detail. Weaker responses got little further than re-telling the narrative of the scene with little sense of design or simply made reference to the initial entry of the characters and Katherina's final speech.

Few candidates offered much in terms of period or genre, with designs frequently not being rooted in any particular time or location.

A Doll's House

Question 3(a)

This was the more popular of the two questions on *A Doll's House* and it was generally answered with some assurance. Most candidates focused well on Rank's relationship with Nora and generally offered a preferred audience response. Most candidates had a sound understanding of the role and examiners commented on how confidently they were taken through the section. Many candidates made apt references to the text

which revealed a subtlety of performance detail that illuminated a fine understanding of Ibsen's naturalistic/realistic style; such answers could recognise the possibility of a number of shifting audience responses from sympathy to surprise to respect.

This was a question where those candidates who understood the period and applied it could add considerable depth to the responses. References to the shocking nature of Nora showing the stockings were well considered, although at least one candidate seemed to believe she was wearing them and therefore created a scene which was totally in opposition to the mores of 19th century society.

Weaker responses gave overlong character studies while others interpreted Rank as a crippled invalid, lurching from chair to 'sofa', hobbling with his stick. Here the level of precise performance detail offered was inadequate and the audience response of sympathy much broader. Other candidates merely told the events of this section or tended to give equal weight to suggesting an audience response to Nora's character and contribution to this interaction.

Examiners also reported that many candidates became carried away with one or other part of the section, making the response quite unbalanced. Those who dismissed Rank as self-pitying seemed particularly harsh, given his imminent death, and there was a problem reported with candidates who either did not understand or were reticent to discuss the causes of his illness.

Generally speaking, most candidates who undertook this question did have a sense of how to bring Rank to life in performance. However, as is so often the case, their understanding and ability to describe his physicality and blocking with Nora was better than their work on the delivery of his lines, where there was frequently a lack of precision or generalised references to volume which did little to reveal the subtleties of the text.

Question 3(b)

Comparatively few candidates attempted this question and those that did struggled to come to terms with its various requirements. Most of the responses were limited in scope with only some mention of Nora's attitude and little idea of the role of the other characters including Anne-Marie and the children.

Many candidates still seem to be uncertain about the term 'staging', with most just seeing it as a chance to direct the actors. Although this is a valid aspect in staging questions, candidates generally underachieved because of the lack of consideration of other elements which might include ideas for set design, lighting, sound and costume, all of which could have helped the candidates to more accurately consider their preferred effects. Some candidates did include something on the setting but this was often not specifically explained in terms of the period nor consistently modern if there was an attempt at transposition. The changing Christmas tree was mentioned, usually with some understanding of its symbolic significance, but without clear indications as to how this symbolism would be conveyed to the audience, or practical reference to its position on stage.

Many answers began with a description of Nora's mental state which was apt but they did not progress to cover enough range in the section. Also, many candidates failed to move on to Act 2 or if they did only gave a perfunctory few lines to it. Few candidates really explained what their preferred effects were and then offered practical details as to how these would be achieved.

The Shadow of a Gunman

Question 4(a)

This was not a particularly popular question and on the whole it was not particularly well handled. Those candidates who did tackle it usually managed to establish some of the moods contained within Act One - usually comic and romantic - and atmospheres - usually claustrophobic and cluttered. Most were able to make some reference to set, providing an impression of the untidy room, but with either insufficient practical detail of the design or, as was the case with some candidates, providing so much information about the minutiae of the props and dressing that they had virtually run out of time before getting on to tackle the second part of the question on supporting action. With regard to lighting, few moved much beyond giving the impression of morning. Only the most able candidates seemed to understand the need to link their design ideas to the action of the Act and even then only a few moments were considered, generally Seumas' waking up and Davoren's 'seduction' of Minnie.

Many responses betrayed a lack of design awareness and detail. There were set descriptions and sketches offered but these often revealed impractical arrangements such as a lack of access, an invisible window or suggested 'modern' furniture as in a 'flat'. There was however some general sense of the poverty of a Dublin tenement in 1920.

Lighting was referred to but lacked subtlety and a natural quality. Either there was a bland reference to the lighting remaining the same without any technical references and no indication of the complexity of lighting in a naturalistic manner, or there was a tendency to offer a range of gel alternatives – straw for morning light (apt), but then in quick succession, red for the anger of the landlord, pink for love scenes, blue/grey for a shadow at the end of the Act, with coloured spotlights on each of the characters as they enter and spotlights on whoever was speaking. None of this really revealed that the candidate had an understanding of the naturalistic qualities of the play.

Question 4(b)

This was the more popular question and examiners reported considerable unevenness in candidates' success. It would appear that many candidates either misinterpreted the question or failed to recognise its full scope, choosing instead to treat it as a directorial question on the Grigsons. Consequently many of the responses failed to engage with the other characters and therefore did not really consider the desired effects for the whole section. Where effects were identified, these were often not clear enough beyond a general sense of confusion and uncertainty and these were insufficiently tied down to specific moments of action. Once again, many candidates failed to recognise the significance of the term 'staging' and therefore made little, if any, reference to the

off-stage sounds at the end of the section or paid due attention to the blocking of what is quite a large number of characters in a comparatively small space.

Many answers started with lengthy discussions about casting the Grigsons, and although these did on the whole suggest a reasonable level of understanding of the two characters and their relationship, they did little to convince that the candidates had paid due attention to the demands of the answers. In some answers Donal and Seumas were not mentioned at all but in the best answers, the reactions to the Grigsons' interruptions were very well addressed and the scene as a whole emerged with considerable vitality.

Mr Grigson's entrance revealing his drunkenness was usually given detailed directorial consideration, indicating what he bumps into, sometimes the reactions of the others on stage, and with some attention paid to his speech. However, virtually no candidates made any reference to his song, suggesting perhaps that they are unaware of what it should sound like.

Several candidates based their responses on the wrong section of the Act – choosing to look at Mrs Grigson's subsequent entrance towards the end of the Act where she exits without her husband.

However, where candidates had recognised the genre of the piece and were able to use O'Casey's stage directions and character notes to inform their understanding rather than slavishly copying them, they produced some imaginative and vivid descriptions of moments across the section, designed to reveal changing effects.

Oh What a Lovely War

Question 5(a)

Of the design-based questions, this was generally the most effectively done with some interesting ideas for the costuming of this scene in relation to the indication of nationality. Many candidates suggested having the appropriate flags as part of the costume: as a waistcoat, sewn onto sleeves, trouser legs and hats, but other ideas included having ties which had the relevant currency depicted on them. The practicality of some of the ideas needed further development, with some candidates suggesting far too tiny details which would be invisible to the audience and therefore were not helpful – for example, tie and hat pins or small badges. Some ideas which started out utilising good nation-related props or items of costume, such as a beret for the Frenchman and a bowler hat for the Englishman, had trouble suggesting what the Swiss and German would wear. The Ghillie was usually seen as more traditional, wearing a kilt (and sometimes a sporrán). Most candidates recognised the need for the performers to have a base costume of pierrot, or theatre blacks or a suit, but where candidates suggested a complete costume change, they often did not address this in relation to the style of the production as a whole.

Accessories and props were less well handled with each nationality possessing sundry items such as strings of garlic for the French, bowler hats for the English and cigars or hamburgers (?) for the American. Various walking sticks or pieces of wood were employed as guns but it was only the best candidates who justified clearly their use in

terms of the overall style. Thus, the degree of invention varied and much was justified by a very broad understanding of 'Brechtian', but the mix of contemporary and modern interpretations was not always convincing.

The chief weakness in answers to this question was the serious lack of attention given to stage action. Although the guns were often mentioned and a style suggested, there was little sense of how and when the performers would use them. The birds which were shot were also mentioned but few considered the real practicalities of these, short of having them flung from all directions, and especially not their design. One answer which had a mountain of birds to represent the dead in the war needed more practical consideration, although the inventiveness was interesting. The picnic and its place within the dialogue received very little consideration; in fact, many candidates failed to locate any of their ideas actually within the text, offering negligible references to it. Above all of the flaws in many of the weaker answers was that the candidates did not seem to know who these characters were nor their function in revealing the corruption of war, in some cases referring to them as soldiers.

Question 5(b)

Examiners reported seeing some very effective and well developed answers to this question. The focus on directing the actors was generally maintained, although in some cases candidates spent too much time on staging ideas at the expense of precise details as to how the performers should be revealing the different moods. Where answers to this question were at their most developed was where the candidate clearly enjoyed the challenge and possessed a confident view of the style of the play and its potential for rapid movement from one scene to another. In the best answers an assured stage format was established, open and flexible, which supported the performers with technical ideas designed precisely to accommodate the rapid shifts of mood and performers on stage.

There was however a tendency for answers to this question to become rather imbalanced. Many candidates spent a great deal of time establishing the mood of the French and German Officers, discussing and directing them in great detail in order to establish entirely appropriate, usually sombre, moods, with many pointing out how this contrasts with the prevailing moods during the rest of the play. Most candidates recognised the shift in mood with the entry of the Girl and the couples, which was addressed quite practically and also with some apt discussion of their positioning on stage. Consideration of the actual delivery of the songs (and indeed the way that the music might help influence the mood) was less effective, with the candidates spending more time on blocking and the relationship with the audience than on vocal qualities. Weaker answers failed to differentiate between the patriotic and romantic moods of the respective songs.

The strongest answers managed to pay equal attention to all aspects of the section but very often (through lack of time?) the Drill Sergeant was given quite a cursory treatment, doing little more than identifying him as a bully, although the best answers blended the men in the 'Hold Your Hand Out' section into the recruits in the later section. Some candidates tried to force historical or cultural references onto part of the specified section; these were rarely effective and often missed the point of it being both amusing but also horrific.

Weaker answers focused too heavily on the narrative and stage directions, offering little in the way of invention.

Playhouse Creatures

Question 6(a)

This was by far the more popular of the two questions on this text with examiners reporting some very creditable work which revealed a good understanding of both character and period. Most candidates demonstrated knowledge of Mrs Farley with some clear performance details that showed a sound balance of movement, gesture and stance with the vocal delivery of the dialogue. Most candidates appreciated a contrasting audience response to Mrs Farley in each scene, usually from sympathy to irritation/annoyance.

In Scene Two the majority of candidates addressed the issue of Mrs Farley and her social position in a variety of ways; however, not all were based on sufficient understanding of the period. Many talked of the status of women in society but few made a link to problems faced by Mrs Farley after the death of her father. Her style of preaching was defined quite well by many, and some candidates suggested a link between her voice projection and physicality and why she is given the job in the theatre. There was frequently quite a lot of creditable detail about her performance in this scene, although weaker candidates tended to rely on assertion for eliciting a sympathetic response or wanted to discuss Nell as much, and sometimes more. For this reason many candidates only focused on her pompous interaction with Nell without considering any of the other moments in Scene Three. In fact many answers did not mention her performance in the beginning of the third scene, whilst some candidates suggested she should be performing in entirely unsuitable states of undress which revealed a lack of knowledge and understanding of the period. Some responses to this text suffered from an over-reliance on pre-prepared material on feminist theatre and on De Angelis' style and method which, although valid, could have been used more purposefully to inform the practical performance suggestions.

Many candidates made quite purposeful reference to costume in their answers, explaining how the change from her demure puritanical dress to one that revealed flesh and petticoats might be used by the actor to alter her stance and gait.

Question 6(b)

Examiners reported seeing extremely few answers to this question. In those that were seen, candidates again revealed an uncertainty as to what might be included in 'staging' and the result of this was a lot of narration with very little sense of desired effects. Candidates tended to focus on the allocation of 'parts', the discussion about the relationships with the King and Earl and the fire, whilst Scene Six was often completely omitted. Even when candidates did make reference to moments in the scenes, ideas were largely generalised and did little to convey any sense of action.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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