



General Certificate of Education

Drama and Theatre Studies 1241

Unit 1A Live Theatre Production Seen

Report on the Examination

2010 examination - January series

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Unit 1A – Live Theatre Production Seen

General

Examiners reported a greater confidence in the handling of the specific focus of the questions, with centres now into the second year of the new specification. There was quite a range of productions covered, although it was noted that for many candidates who were obviously re-sitting this paper, there was an over-reliance on work that they had seen a long time ago - in some cases, as long ago as September 2008. Where this was the case, often their ability to recall the specific details of the production was limited or as was frequently reported, they attempted to re-write a response to June 2009's questions and make it fit the current ones. This was most noticeable in answers to Question 3 where many candidates still used productions where multi-roling had been a significant element but they failed to address the specific demands of the question.

There were responses to all questions, although Questions 1 and 3 were the most popular. Clearly, candidates are engaged with live theatre and there were some thoughtful and detailed responses with a purposeful approach to the precise demands of the question. On the whole, productions were mostly apt, although at times candidates would have been better advised to have chosen a different question. This was particularly noticeable in Questions 3 and 4. However, most candidates recognised the need to address particular moments from the production in order to realise all the demands of the question.

It was also clear that for some candidates still comparatively near the start of their course, possibly with only one production seen (i.e. one set of A4 notes) and in some cases this being restricted to in-house work, the demands are too challenging as their choice is inevitably restricted. It was inevitable that for these candidates meeting the specific demands of the questions proved challenging and therefore teachers are reminded that the specification states that 'the productions of live theatre seen should include a range of different styles of theatre'; candidates with a greater choice of productions to select from were invariably able to maximise the opportunities offered by this paper. Design questions should only be attempted if a candidate has some specialist knowledge of that area.

A large percentage of candidates had recognised the need to make reference to the style and aims of the production and whilst many of them did this quite well, only the most able maintained the awareness of how this was presented in the performance. There were also many responses that lessened the impact of their analysis by determinedly spending a full page or more on a previously prepared description of the plot/set/themes regardless of the demands of the question.

Some candidates had very detailed and well-organised notes which showed that they had seen a range of pieces and which demonstrated an awareness of the different aspects of theatre which might form the focus of the question. It was disappointing to see that quite a number of candidates' notes were inadequate, having no more than a couple of references to any one specific aspect of the production.

Some candidates answered well on performances of scripted plays seen in their own centre, but they must remember that they should be writing about something they have seen, not something they participated in. It is not possible to write an analysis of a performance where the candidate has not been a true audience member as it distorts the understanding of audience response, making the required objectivity impossible.

In a minority of cases, candidates still failed to identify either the date or venue of the production seen: this is a requirement of the examination. Examiners reported seeing fewer examples of 'set texts' in performance but where these were chosen, there were fewer instances of theoretical work than in the June exam and more where the candidates had used their knowledge of the work to inform their reference to particular moments on stage.

As written in the previous report, it is very important that candidates do not make assumptions about examiners' prior knowledge. Each particular moment analysed should briefly be set in its context and the candidate should then attempt to re-create, for the examiner, the experience they had whilst in the audience.

Question 1

This was a reasonably popular question with a comparatively wide range of productions used – however, the quality of the responses was very varied.

Where candidates had clearly been well prepared to approach any aspect of set design, there were some very impressive answers. Precise descriptions of the actual locations were clear and supported by helpful sketches. The best sketches were labelled, showing the position of the audience and all major design features. These sketches were also most useful if positioned near the beginning of the response, enabling both the candidate and the examiner to refer to them. Similar sketches placed at the end of the essay were often less useful, sometimes appearing as an afterthought and on occasions being so tiny and lacking in any detail as to be of little use; this seemed to suggest that these candidates were not sure of the value of including sketches.

Where no sketch appeared, the examiner was reliant upon the amount of detail in the set description. Sometimes this was creditable with references to the design fundamentals of format, levels, scale, materials, texture and colour. However, examiners reported that all too often responses did not go much further than a cursory description of props and furniture – a table, a chair, a bench – sometimes in the stated context of 'minimalism' where 'everything was left to the imagination of the audience'. This became one of the major weaknesses in responses to this question where candidates had chosen unwisely or defined the scope of the design very narrowly. To say that the set design was minimalistic and that the locations were created with lighting and sound was not an appropriate approach; responses that dealt with in-house work often fell into this category.

The required focus on creating appropriate location(s) for the action was often very generalised with references to a garden, an office, a school library but lacking real detail in terms of recognisable design terminology. Although the candidates did sometimes offer apt details, it was frequently unclear how the action of the scene was accommodated by the design; the more precisely candidates linked their analyses to particular moments, the clearer they were in discussing action. Where candidates did fail to discuss the location, they frequently just wrote about what was on stage. This was quite marked in productions such as *War Horse* where many candidates simply described the revolve, the projection screen and the floor of the stage without actually considering how these created locations such as the farm, the auction or the battlefield.

Overall it must be said that candidates undertaking design questions need at the very least a basic knowledge of set design; without knowledge of sufficient design terminology weaker candidates struggled to provide any meaningful detail or they suffered through lack of awareness as to how a design works on stage. *The Woman in Black* was described, on several occasions, as having no scenery at the beginning – because it looked like a theatre – and although in *An Inspector Calls* there was usually mention of a second, smaller house on stage,

many candidates were unable to explain its significance. However, there were also many examples where candidates, having defined the location and described the design, gave precise discussions of the action within it, illustrating how the performance as a whole was enhanced by the set and the acting areas it created. This was especially strong in references to *Black Watch* and Frantic Assembly's *Othello*.

Question 2

Although not a particularly popular question, it did elicit some excellent responses from those candidates who had seen work where the sound design was a key element to the production and where they had sufficient knowledge of appropriate terminology to be able to discuss its effect for an audience. The requirement of the question to focus on tension was generally well recognised and addressed. Examiners reported that more candidates seem to be realising that music is part of the soundscape, and that their discussion of sound does not need to be restricted to sound effects, with many of the better answers contrasting sounds (live or recorded) with a vivid use of silence.

There was also some effective consideration given to the use of vocal and choral sound, including non-verbal sounds. Some of the better answers described in detail how sound combined with other theatrical elements to produce tension at particular moments. Where candidates wrote solely about a series of brief sound moments – a shout, a roll of thunder, a creaking noise, a footstep – they tended to be less successful as these moments were rarely analysed in sufficient detail to show how they enhanced the tension. Similarly, some candidates had a tendency to discuss tension in terms of the overall action on stage with the sound only being mentioned in passing.

Less effective responses tended to stray into the creation of location by the use of ambient sound, but the main weakness was the failure to provide sufficient reference to the nature of the sound: live/recorded, volume, direction; as with any question on a design skill, it is imperative that candidates both use and understand the appropriate terminology – without this, answers become generalised and imprecise. This lack of precision was also evident when candidates were discussing music, with frequent references only to the name of the tune or the artist. However well-known (or obscure) the music is, there needs to be definition of the qualities of its particular use or references to the sound of instruments used to create tension.

The Woman in Black provided many candidates with an appropriate production and a good focus. Others who chose to discuss musicals (*Avenue Q* and *Wicked* being two of the most popular) often found it difficult to consider exactly how the use of song was helping to enhance the tension.

Question 3

This was without doubt the most popular question, with candidates selecting appropriate productions, choosing one or more performers and focusing on the changing responses of the audience, either in terms of reactions to one role throughout a production or a combination of roles. However, many struggled to demonstrate effectively the full range of the demands of the question. The performers' vocal and physical skills were described quite well and often in some detail, and this was usually accompanied by some appropriate assessment. However, weaker candidates would frequently progress to what were essentially character profiles with the effect being that their answers became literary and not a practical exploration of performance skills. Most responses were precise about particular moments, although there was a tendency to define the first impression of a character without relating this closely enough to the scene in

which they first appeared: a clear brief description of the context of the moment really helps the examiner to appreciate a candidate's point.

It was, however, the analysis of 'changing responses' that caused the most concern. All too often this was only referred to in relation to character and situation; it was as if candidates thought they were addressing performance by virtue of writing about interpretation. The frustration for the examiner here was that, despite the detail conveyed and the obvious engagement with the live production, there was little to credit in terms of the demands of the question. In many cases there was a sense that the candidates only realised what was required after they had been writing for a while, thereby creating an unbalanced answer which lacked focus initially but achieved the required response in the second half. Some candidates obviously realised what they had omitted and had to insert, as additions, references to the audience response and how this changed.

However, there were also some excellent responses which looked in detail at a suitable range of moments and considered with some subtlety how the performers in one or two roles used their skills in terms of changes of tone, gesture, interaction, use of space to shift the sympathies and reactions of the audience. Where candidates were really selective about what they chose to analyse and did not try to cover too broad a range of moments or performers, these answers created vivid pictures of what the candidate had experienced. Examiners noted that in this question more than any other that where candidates had taken time to plan their responses, they tended to be more focused and precise.

Question 4

This was not a particularly popular question, although many candidates who undertook Question 3 might have found this a more suitable option. Generally those candidates who did attempt it met the demands of the question, recognising the requirement to analyse the skills of two or more performers in productions that were generally appropriate.

The definition of naturalistic was usually accurate and plays were well chosen to reflect a sensitive and detailed observation and assessment of the performers' skills. The most able candidates exploited the style of a naturalistic production with assurance, selecting appropriate characters in strong moments to reveal a character's journey through the production.

For other candidates the most problematic aspect was their choice of characters which they assessed as naturalistic. Some productions such as musicals were often unhelpful choices, although pieces such as *Blood Brothers*, when a candidate focused on the more naturalistic sections, offered a chance to assess the performance appropriately. *Six Characters in Search of an Author* was recognised by most of the candidates who chose it to offer a naturalistic section at the beginning which was very suitable for this question, but that the 'characters' themselves do not. This was also evident in productions such as *Caravan* or *Mother Courage* which, whilst clearly non-naturalistic, did allow the candidates to recognise the naturalistic qualities in particular performances and for some this proved to be a subtle and well-observed exercise.

Other productions, such as *Avenue Q*, can hardly be regarded as naturalistic; what candidates were often addressing was a sense that the emotions and ideas portrayed were realistic or universal. Where this was the case, they often found it difficult to fully explain how what the performers were doing could be considered to be naturalistic whilst weaker candidates went down a pedestrian path, giving general descriptions of moments with a scarcity of actual performance skills. Examiners also commented on the fact that weaker candidates were often unable to define what it was about the selected performers that was naturalistic, simply relying on assertion.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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