



General Certificate of Education

Drama and Theatre Studies 2241

Unit 4 Presentation of Devised Drama

Report on the Examination

2010 examination - June series

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Unit 4 – Presentation of Devised Drama

General

Many of the general points made in the AS report also apply to this level.

While this was a new examination it is pleasing to report that many teachers had availed themselves of advice from standardisation meetings, from their course work advisor and from the various support materials provided by the board in order to familiarise themselves with the requirements and expected standards at this level. These teachers were well equipped to guide their candidates.

Many teachers were well prepared for the moderation but there were a considerable number of entries which had not fully appreciated the differences between AS and A2, especially in relation to the requirement for candidates to devise in a specific performance style rather than in the style of a specific practitioner. Some candidates had also failed to appreciate the different demands of the Supporting Notes.

The majority of misunderstandings related to choice of performance style. Some chose styles that were difficult to see live, and therefore extremely difficult for candidates to emulate. Others offered generic labels such as 'post modernist' or simply 'abstract' style which did their candidates no service whatsoever.

Choice of style

Without a doubt this was one of the most significant areas within the candidates' work – both in terms of why they succeeded and why they did less well. Where candidates had clearly identified their chosen style right at the start of the process (and also where they had been given the opportunity of experimenting in a variety of styles before settling on one) and proceeded to undertake a range of research into that particular style, there was far more chance of them producing work that was obviously well informed.

Sometimes it was very apparent from the candidates' supporting notes that they had selected a style in which they had had very little experience, and this was often reflected, particularly in physical theatre, in work that either had insufficient substance or demonstrated insufficiently precise performance skills.

Some candidates seemed unsure as to their chosen style, opting for very broad areas which required further definition. Where groups had nominated a broad style such as 'Creative Adaptation' but further defined it: Creative Adaptation (Physical Theatre) this helped them to focus more appropriately during their devising process.

One key element that is pleasing to report is that moderators reported few occasions where the chosen style and subject matter were completely at odds with one another.

The most frequently seen styles were: Physical Theatre, Realism, Creative Adaptation, Theatre of Cruelty, Storytelling and Verbatim.

Candidates who selected 'epic theatre' and 'theatre of cruelty' were often attempting to re-use their knowledge of Brecht or Artaud as acquired at AS, and this occasionally led them into a very narrow perception of the broader style selected. This unit is not focused on examining

candidates' understanding of a single practitioner so candidates penalised themselves, especially in their Supporting Notes, if they treated their work as they had at AS.

Candidates should also be discouraged from an approach where they 'cherry pick' elements from more than one style which often results in a confused performance style overall. Where candidates had identified work that they had seen in their chosen style and were able to draw on the specific elements of that live work, it obviously informed the decisions they made in a constructive way.

The best work was seen from candidates working in a widely known and recognisable performance style that they had been able to see for themselves on stage and then explore in both theoretical and practical terms.

Not all candidates had appreciated the principles and requirements that underpin the whole of DRAM4.

Administration

Please see the equivalent section in the AS Report.

Additionally, please note the importance of returning Form DTSV4 (Green) to the moderator at least one month before the examination so that moderators may check the suitability of the theatre style selected.

Application of the marking criteria

Marking of the actual performances was largely accurate, but where teachers had not attended a standardisation meeting showing exemplar material, they were disadvantaged by not necessarily understanding the new A2 standard in relation to devised work. Some appeared to be applying the AS standard from the previous specification, thus over-rewarding devised pieces that did not meet the new A2 criteria.

Some teachers had not appreciated the specification demand that:

- Unit 4 increases the demands placed on candidates in practical Unit 2 by requiring a **more advanced level of performance and/or production skills** underpinned by independent thought and refined in the light of their research.
- the unit is synoptic in its requirements for candidates to address artistic challenges **by adopting a distinctive style of theatre that they have seen as well as studied**, and to bring together both their theoretical knowledge and practical experience to create an original piece of theatre (Specification Section 3.4).

Supporting Notes

Although some sets of notes were over long the vast majority of candidates stuck to the limits of between 500 and 700 words **per** section (and not an aggregate, irrespective of individual section limits, as some thought).

In the notes of better candidates it was clear that the teachers had shared the mark scheme and criteria with them. Candidates used phrases from the specification/mark schemes as their

section headings and wrote concisely to address the requirements of each section. They gave careful attention to balancing the content of their work so that each requirement was addressed. Sometimes, however, candidates had put material into the wrong sections and therefore lost marks unnecessarily.

This unit requires candidates to have seen live work in a given style and, having analysed the key features of that style to use them to devise their own piece of theatre to fulfil precisely defined intentions for the audience. It is therefore worth summarising the requirements for each section in this report.

Section 1

This section requires candidates to offer evidence of exploration/research into the selected theatrical style, identifying its key features, and to justify their choice of style in relation to clear dramatic intentions for an audience (this includes reference to the content/topic chosen for treatment). This material should be supported by a list of play(s) read and evaluation of the ways in which they have helped to influence the emerging style of the devised piece.

Section 2

Candidates should outline their **devising strategies** (how they got from an empty space/blank page to a fully realised piece of drama), and they should offer some assessment of their refinement of their work in the light of their own intentions and of feedback.

Section 3

Candidates should evaluate the piece and its potential effectiveness for an audience as a piece of live theatre. They should make reference to the style of the piece. Candidates should offer objective assessment of the development of their nominated skill in relation to the chosen style of Theatre, and show an awareness of health and safety factors.

The main mistakes candidates made can be summarised as follows:

Section 1

- writing about a practitioner and not a style
- writing about more than one style
- no reference made to live theatre seen in the nominated style
- reference to films seen rather than theatre
- restricted experience of the style, and hence restricted or misunderstanding of the key features of it
- intentions for the audience not considered
- missing lists of plays seen/books read/websites used.

Section 2

- descriptive of rehearsals or of decisions made
- lack of pertinent exemplification of strategies used
- no mention of style
- no mention of the refinement of the work
- no mention of changes made to the piece in light of feedback.

Section 3

- no assessment of the piece in terms of the chosen style
- no attempt to assess the development of the skill **in relation to the chosen style**
- overlong health and safety at the expense of other requirements.

Nonetheless, there were some very good sets of notes seen by moderators where candidates wrote purposefully, concisely and vividly in all three sections so that the moderator had a very clear idea about what they were about to see.

Group Presentations

Examiners reported seeing work that was deeply engaging, precise, thoughtful, imaginative, creative and fully realised, considering all aspects of the presentation for an audience.

They also saw a wide range of styles of theatre tackled by groups of candidates which reflected their complete understanding of the style.

There was a real variety of subject matter tackled, ranging from pieces based on historical figures or events to taboo subjects. Whether these were successful or not depended on the maturity of the candidates concerned in their approach.

The best pieces embraced all elements of the selected style full bloodedly, with total integration of scripting, visual elements and performance style clearly evident. Good work usually resulted when groups had seen a lot of live theatre in their chosen style which they could then incorporate into their own work. For example, one group who had chosen epic style to explore the economic crisis referenced techniques they had witnessed in *The Power of Yes*, *Mother Courage* and a touring production of *Shouting, Stamping and Singing Home* in their piece, using projections, song, dance and even a cart that could be pulled around, containing all their props and costumes.

One piece that really stood out was a piece in the style of 'creative adaptation/multimedia' heavily inspired by the work of Katie Mitchell's *Waves* which took the relationship between Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes as its content and explored this almost exclusively through very carefully selected passages from their writings in conjunction with video feeds from 4 live cameras and 3 microphones. This, combined with performances from the two actors of such maturity, made it difficult to remember that this was the work of teenage students.

Another group (working in verbatim) had interviewed people in the streets of a nearby town about their attitudes to the local BNP vote and constructed from this and other verbatim sources a truly chilling and thought provoking piece of work.

Another group, who had selected to adapt *Beauty and the Beast*, used techniques from Kneehigh's *Hansel and Gretel*, from the production of *War Horse* and *The 39 Steps*, and included magic tricks, masks and outrageous and effective costumes made from assorted tat.

Another group, in contrast, devised a laugh-out-loud piece based on the difficulties of being a young male in today's society which used physical techniques juxtaposed with clever, heartfelt monologues such as they had seen in DV8's *To Be Straight With You*, Berkoff's *East*, Godber's *Bouncers* and Frantic Assembly's *Othello*.

Good scripting based on extensive research into style and content also characterised the best work with clever use made of verse and even specially written songs in some pieces. In others,

poetic language was juxtaposed with stark expletives creating the authentic shock experienced in In-yer-face pieces. In the best work, there was always a clear narrative or, in the case of more abstract pieces, a clear journey on which the audience were taken.

Conversely, weaker work often suffered from a lack of understanding of the style of theatre or an attempt to merge too many different elements from the style resulting in a rather confusing experience for the audience. Similarly candidates sometimes opted for a style where they had insufficient understanding or experience of it to enable them to develop the work in a meaningful way. In several instances candidates had clearly over-stretched themselves and were unable to deliver performances that were consonant with their style – this was evident in both naturalistic and physical theatre.

Creation of final scripts was an important element in the work of successful candidates, where it was clear that initially improvised dialogue had been refined, edited, rejected, improved and honed, to make it entirely appropriate to the chosen style.

Weaker performances revealed the fact that the candidates had not allowed themselves sufficient time to rehearse and polish their final product, with the result that they were still improvising up to the day of the exam.

Many groups attempted a Theatre of Cruelty style without having seen very much performed in that style beyond the previous year's AS performance of *4.48 Psychosis*. This led to a very restricted understanding of what authentic Theatre of Cruelty work actually looks like and feels like for an audience.

At its best, groups working in this style produced visceral theatre experiences for the moderator. One such group, in a piece about child killers, completely surrounded the audience, covering them in plastic sheeting to protect them from water that flew up from a child's paddling pool, and created 'hiding places' for the actors, made from 'junk', so that the audience never knew when or from where an actor might appear. This group had certainly understood that there was more to Theatre of Cruelty than generalised screaming in the audience's faces; they employed a disturbing sound track overlaid with constant surprises, and utilised ritualised movement and gesture which achieved their aim of being both disturbing and threatening.

Although there was some very good work witnessed by moderators, there were also some pieces which did not work so well theatrically nor address the assessment criteria sufficiently.

Some groups thought that by just choosing a shocking subject that was enough for In-yer-face Theatre or Theatre of Cruelty, and they had not considered the performance style enough. Where candidates had not seen examples of these styles live they often had a superficial understanding of the style which in itself lead to either spurious treatment of their content or self indulgence and performance indiscipline.

Other weaker groups simply tried to do too much in terms of content, spreading the overall effectiveness too thinly. There were very many pieces seen that were little more than a string of monologues directly addressed to the audience interspersed with a bit of a movement sequence in between each candidate's 'turn'.

In some cases in these, often self-indulgent, pieces, each monologue was based on a different teenage 'angst' topic such as anorexia, homosexuality, rape, or unwanted pregnancy, meaning that no one topic was sufficiently explored, and the structure was repetitive and predictable.

Such candidates might have been better advised to stick to one topic only but to explore it in more depth.

Insufficient background research into the style or content being presented always led to superficiality in devised pieces.

Other features that marred some pieces were the prevalence of noisy scene changes, over-long blackouts, over-frequent blackouts and blackouts that lasted longer than the scenes between them. Candidates do need to consider their transitions carefully as nothing interferes with the overall effectiveness of a piece more than these constant and 'empty' interruptions. It is also an indicator that the group has not been able to structure the overall piece effectively. Occasionally the only reason a moderator knew the piece had finished was because the last member of the group had 'done their monologue', and the teacher had started to applaud.

Candidates also need to be reminded about the stipulated timings for pieces. While there were many occasions where moderators were left 'eager for more', the very opposite sensation of 'eager for the end' was occasionally experienced.

Candidates should consider the total visual impact of their work. Some groups played everything downstage centre or created a split focus for the audience because they had not considered their use of space sufficiently. There has also been a return of the 'black leggings and t-shirt' look this year irrespective of the chosen style.

Some groups made no attempt to create a sense of period through the selection and use of suitable clothing and props. There were also instances of some groups acting in their socks, for no apparent reason.

In the best pieces there was always full attention given to the visual elements of the work with some astounding costumes, extraordinary hairstyles and make up (especially in expressionist pieces) and, occasionally, clever use of moving projected images.

Directing

In the work of most directing candidates, it was very clear where artistic decisions had been taken that were entirely appropriate, and also where a little more thought could have been given to the mechanics of the pieces.

The best directors had clearly considered the use of space, groupings and movement. They had helped to effect smooth transitions, and they understood the need to vary the tempo of the piece and to find the rhythm and climax necessary to ensure a complete theatrical experience.

It was vitally important that directors fully understood the style that the group were intending to present their work in. Unfortunately there were occasions where this was clearly not the case.

Moderators reported seeing several examples of work where, under the director's guiding hand, the style was unevenly applied, so that some naturalistic sections would suddenly be interrupted by 'spirits' dressed in flimsy black gowns, in one instance, and with pulsating music and throbbing lights, presumably to accommodate the skills of a technical designer in the group, but certainly not helping to convey the actors' chosen style.

Indeed attempts at surrealism were rarely handled appropriately. This was also true of some groups offering work in the style of Absurdism. Here it would have been helpful for the director to differentiate between the quiriness of some Absurdist drama, and the often puerile expression that groups seemed to gravitate towards.

It is evident that candidates undertaking this skill must have a real maturity both in their approach to the selection of material, and also in the collaborative nature of the devising process.

Acting

As with the AS examination, this was, overwhelmingly, the most popular skill chosen. The strongest candidates amazed moderators by turning in some truly astonishing performances across the full range of styles seen.

These candidates had honed their skills to the particular style they were working in with acute emotional and intellectual engagement where appropriate.

In the work of better candidates there was both variety and detail in everything they did on stage. Where accents were adopted they were well sustained and good performers, working in an expressionist or Theatre of Cruelty style, realised, in particular, how they could disturb their audiences with their lower register or a whisper.

There were also some very funny performances seen, with expert comic timing demonstrated not only in delivering a punch line but also in the timing of sidelong looks and cheeky interaction with the audience.

One such candidate, for example, playing an eighteenth century gentleman, used his wig and frock coat to flirt, coyly, with the audience whilst at the same time peering over the top of his glasses to flutter his eyelashes. This moment lasted for a second or two at the most but was but one moment amongst a continuous stream of sophisticated and confident comic moments where the actor toyed with the audience and engaged them so much they were bound to listen to him.

Other candidates, acting in farce style pieces, were very adept at timing slapstick and pratfalls. For example, one candidate caused great hilarity when she drank water from a goldfish bowl – gold fish and all – and even more hilarity when she ejected the ‘fish’ forcibly from her mouth across the stage with a huge splutter.

Weaker candidates sometime suffered because they did not have the physical co-ordination that the rest of their group had in ensemble work, and they stood out for this reason.

At their best, candidates performing in physical theatre style maintained complete control of both their vocal and physical work, and moderators saw some beautifully choreographed and inventive sequences, evidently inspired by the likes of Frantic Assembly and DV8, which were clearly designed as an alternative method of conveying the narrative.

When these worked well, there was no sense of the movement sequences being ‘padding’, rather that the candidates had developed the work with a view to enhancing the audience’s experience and understanding. Weaker performers failed to convince that this was the case, and there was much incoherent jumping and writhing seen.

In more naturalistic or realistic performances best candidates adopted and maintained highly appropriate regional accents whilst considering every nuance and speech and physical performance patterns.

Others delivered their monologues in a generalised way without any sense of journey or thought behind what they were saying, resulting in repeated cadences which lost the effectiveness of

the content of what they were saying. Others were very inexpressive facially, with little reaction to extraordinary events on stage occurring around them. Some candidates hardly appeared on stage at all or were stuck at the back hidden in darkness.

Set Design

There were some very impressive set designs seen this year especially when candidates were adopting an Expressionist or Theatre of Cruelty style.

Good candidates were able to create a sense of location very simply. For example, one candidate created a sense that the actors (and audience) were in Soho through the use of scaffolding, attached to framed gauzes, which were back lit to look like brothel windows. At other times, in the piece, the scaffolding was up lit to look like a giant web which provided a metaphor for the tangled entrapment in the piece's narrative.

In addition, as the candidate explained in her Supporting Notes, because she did not have access to real neon lighting she created the effect of neon by making letters out of wood which were painted white, suspended from the lighting rig, held together with line and then lit with shocking pink and red. This was the sign of an ingenious candidate.

Another candidate had drawn on expressionist artists from the early 20th century to make a kinetic set that moved from side to side during the performance, using curtain rails that were pulled and pushed by the actors to change scenes easily.

Another candidate, inspired by Shunt's use of audience entrapment in their productions, had created a cling film covered box within another larger cling film covered box within an enormous white 'garden fleece' covered outer box.

The actors performed in the two inner boxes and the audience, sealed off at the beginning of the performance had no other choice than to watch the disturbing antics of the actors playing Artaud and Anais Nin. The actors were also able to create disturbing sounds just by running their hands on the cling film or to distort their faces by pushing them into it.

In all the above cases the candidates had worked very closely with the actors to ensure their sets were safe, and enabled space to accommodate the traffic of the stage. Weaker candidates had not taken this into account at all.

Weaker candidates produced unimaginative and/or unsuitable settings for their acting colleagues, where little thought had apparently gone into the scale, colour, space or use of the design in the piece. Entrances were poorly positioned, crudely painted flats wobbled dangerously, and actors found themselves cramped during the performance as they manoeuvred their way around oddly positioned and/or inappropriate pieces of furniture.

Where candidates chose this option as an attempt to avoid the hard work and discipline of their other design or acting colleagues, some very dreary sets resulted.

Costume Design

This was not such a popular choice of skill at this level and what was seen demonstrated costume designs somewhat restricted in more ways than one. Some were not stylised enough, others did not give a sense of period or character. Others just did not fit properly, and left the

actors constantly playing with it to make it stay up. This then affected the overall effectiveness of the acting as well as the costumes.

Many designers had played it 'safe' in their designs. There were some pretty Edwardian costumes created for an adaptation of 'Wendy', but they did not in any way 'speak' to the audience beyond giving a vague sense of period.

One candidate had made two costumes for a Commedia inspired piece. The costumes were for Pierrot and a Harlequin character. These costumes were largely appropriate, although the open neckline for the Harlequin character created difficulties for the actor wearing it, and she was constantly adjusting it in performance.

Too often it appeared that costume designers had worked with what was available already in their departmental stock cupboard rather than really allowing their imaginations to guide them.

The best designers supported the group and gave the whole performance a more theatrically effective appearance. Some candidates took a great deal of responsibility for costuming the whole group, although in some cases this was at the expense of the detail required in the one fully realised costume as required by the specification.

As always, the difference between the best and the less effective designers was the attention to detail. Trailing threads, unfinished hems, bra straps showing, inappropriate underwear were all in evidence, and had an effect on the final result.

Technical Elements

This was a more popular and more successful area of skill this year

The very best lighting designs revealed complete integration between the action and intent for audience, and it becomes obvious where a design candidate has been integral in the devising process and not simply waited, passively, for the piece to become fully formed before engaging with it artistically.

Some stunning lighting designs in particular were seen. The most successful were those that had been heavily influenced by what the candidates had seen in their selected style, and the lights were used almost as another character in the piece.

Fully integrated into the action and carefully controlled to elicit a certain audience response, candidates were able to heighten the atmosphere created by the actors through use of different angled lights such as side lighting, up lighting, back lighting and with no resort to gimmicks.

Moderators were thrilled to see oscillating and pulsing lights used to accompany bass lines in a soundtrack, and subtle use of colour mixing. In expressionist pieces good candidates had been able to use a UV lantern, and in one case, with birdies up-lighting the cyclorama, to create gigantic ghostly and nightmarish shadows on the white cyclorama.

Another candidate passed light through lace to create a diffused and soft pattern on both the actors and the stage. It was beautiful, and mirrored the tenderness in the scene perfectly.

Some candidates still seem to undertake this skill with a lack of understanding of what can be achieved through careful selection of colour, focus, angle and use of shade and shadow. Several candidates opted for the use of gauzes which can be very effective in communicating different approaches to the narrative.

Candidates who used sound had clearly been influenced by live theatre, and in one example the audience entered to disturbing, droning music reminiscent of the type used by *Punchdrunk* and *Shunt*. Levels were also carefully controlled, whilst weaker candidates seemed to play all their music at full blast.

One candidate, who had offered sound, produced an almost continuous soundtrack for a piece of physical theatre exploring body image. Through a range of techniques including manipulating existing sound, and composing, recording and distorting original music, he demonstrated how effective this skill can be at enhancing the work of the performers, and, as with lighting, the need to be an integral and integrated member of the devising ensemble.

Weaker candidates were unable to access the technical equipment needed to fully realise their ideas, and centres are encouraged to make sure that candidates are not entered for this skill if the centre has only limited resources.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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