



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

Drama and Theatre Studies

DRAM1A

(Specification 2240)

Unit 1A: Live Theatre Production Seen

Report on the Examination

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DRAM1A – Live Theatre Production Seen

General comments

Examiners were pleased to report that in many ways the accuracy of the answers in this unit appear to be improving. The majority of the productions referred to were very suitable for AS level, frequently involving some challenge in terms of style and offering candidates opportunities to reveal their understanding of theatre practice. In the best responses there was clear evidence of useful guidance from centres and many candidates had a rich and exciting experience of live theatre writing with enormous enthusiasm about the plays resulting in the examiner having a desire to see the production.

Examiners reported seeing work from across the spectrum of live theatre with responses that included many kinds of production from students' own work to site specific and large and small scale productions. Productions by Kneehigh and Frantic Assembly continue to provide a rich vein of material and old favourites of *The Woman in Black*, *The 39 Steps* and *War Horse* were often well referred to. It was also very encouraging to see candidates opting to write about less well known or less 'crowd pleasing' productions which often resulted in candidates bringing something fresh to the paper.

Most candidates provided the required information about the play, the venue in which it was seen and the date of the visit although this was not always the case. The date and venue were sometimes vague or inaccurate, such as "Spring Term, London", and in occasional instances not even the title of the play was specified. Definition of style was also sometimes very vague with some vital basic information such as the fact that something was a musical was not mentioned and several candidates managed to answer on *War Horse* without ever mentioning that the horses were puppets. This information is sometimes omitted because it is so obvious to the candidate but it is certainly necessary for a good answer.

Many answers started with an introductory paragraph which offered a general reference to the piece, defining the style and outlining the plot where appropriate. The themes were often listed at this point too. In some answers this was a helpful opening which 'set the scene'; in others it was a generic statement which bore little relation to the question chosen or its focus. These introductions were particularly evident where candidates were writing about a production that could be clearly defined in terms of its style; however some candidates still tackled this element in too much detail thereby not allowing themselves sufficient time to really get to grips with the detailed analysis of what they had seen on stage. Similarly, weaker responses failed to demonstrate how style or theatrical aims or intentions were revealed in the examples from the production that they referred to.

Most examiners were able to report an improved confidence amongst candidates in meeting the precise demands of the question, with many more of them recognising the focus of the question and being able to relate this to particular moments from the production and including, at the least, an element of assessment or evaluation. As stated in previous reports, it is these three key areas that make up the structure of all questions in this section and it was evident from many of the attached notes that candidates had been encouraged to consider each of these elements after seeing a production. Where candidates have clearly been guided through discussion about what type of question each of the productions they have seen would be useful for, the candidates obviously benefited from ensuring they hit and maintained the question focus. Where this advice has not been adhered to the result was often that, sometimes, clearly able students underachieved due to poor choice of question, for example, discussing a box set realistic production for a question on non-naturalistic set design.

At the other end of the spectrum there are those centres who appear to have virtually dictated entire paragraphs, if not essays, to their students and the examiner was faced with an entire centre of virtually identical responses: this is unlikely to produce a personal response to the theatre event.

The vast majority of candidates still choose to focus on the performance questions on this paper but sometimes would be well advised to consider the other options. Performance questions require detail that often cannot be recalled as easily as a visual image of a set or costume and without detailed notes for specific moments, generally result in generalised responses.

With regard to notes, examiners reported seeing some very detailed and usefully constructed notes, with many candidates adopting a grid structure that clearly allowed them to focus their thoughts on specific production and performance elements, although there were still many examples where candidates were clearly very poorly equipped with no more than a few lines about one production. This does not suggest sufficient preparation and as the questions are designed to require more than a vague memory of something seen, possibly many months previously, the notes should be considered a necessity and not a luxury! In some cases these were not 'notes' in the way intended, as some students had taken in what was virtually continuous prose that they then basically copied out and tried to make 'fit' a question.

Several centres this year wrote about AS pieces that had been performed in their centres and whilst this is perfectly acceptable, a piece of theatre that probably only lasted at most for 40 minutes is unlikely to provide sufficient material for a response to a question about a production seen. In addition to this, these pieces of examination work are often not suitable for design questions. Candidates should also be reminded that it is not acceptable to write about a piece that they have performed in as this does not allow them to make 'critical and evaluative judgements'.

In instances where the candidate had only included notes on one production there was a tendency towards the very generalised, giving the impression that the candidate was determined to write about that production regardless of its focus and whilst the range of questions on the paper should allow candidates to write about anything seen, the precise focus required does necessitate a degree of selectivity and candidates should not assume the inclusion of a particular theatrical focus. Teachers should be mindful of the specification's recommendation that candidates should see 'a range of different styles of theatre'.

Those responses where candidates have chosen to write about the same production as the play that they are studying for DRAM1B were often self-penalising as the answers were often based on understanding of the text rather than the performance seen. In these cases and in others, it would appear that it had been suggested to some candidates that they criticise the performances seen by adding alternative directions of their own; this was particularly significant in responses to the performance questions and was almost always unhelpful adding little or nothing to the critical analysis of the production and taking up valuable time that the candidate could have used to discuss another moment.

Worryingly there also seem to be a trend amongst some students who seemed to believe it was mandatory to include a sketch with their answers. Whereas this was essential to communicate full understanding for Question 01 and possibly useful for Question 02, this belief resulted in what amounted to usually wasted time that again would have been far better used in analysing details of the performer(s)' skills.

On a final and positive note though, there continues to be some very exciting work produced in this part of the examination which really demonstrates how candidates have engaged with their course and brought their often extensive knowledge of theatre practice into the responses.

Question 01

Most of the answers to this question did relate to non-naturalistic set designs, perhaps because very realistic designs are relatively rare. The best answers defined in what way the set was non-naturalistic. In other cases it felt as though the choice was fortuitous rather than specific, as no real definition was offered as to what the non-naturalistic qualities were. Some candidates tended to focus on the realistic aspects of the set, furniture or props, for example, and did not fully develop the qualities within the non-naturalistic design.

A comparatively large number of candidates, at all levels, did not offer a sketch, however basic. For others the sketch was an important and informative tool which was referred to in the text as well as being well labelled. The best candidates realised that the sketch is part of the answer and therefore not something to be added at the end if there is time. Some sketches were very precise about the positioning on stage and helped to make the comments far easier to follow; even a bird's eye view can convey the essential details of the design and its impact.

The relation to the themes of the play was conveyed extremely well in some cases and hardly mentioned in others. Even answers which defined the themes in the opening paragraph did not always make clear reference to these in the answer, and the significance of the set at particular moments seemed to present candidates with some difficulty. In many cases the impact of the set seemed to be based on the opinions formed as the candidate viewed the preset. Candidates who could talk well about elements of set design that they would use in response to DRAM1B, seemed not to recognise the potential impact on an audience of such pieces of design at particular moments in the production seen.

Good candidates showed a very secure understanding of the demands of a designer's role and those candidates who chose epic theatre productions or more expressionistic pieces were able to explain the sets that they had seen with a good degree of clarity. However, weaker answers showed only a limited realisation of design fundamentals and examples of how design exemplified issues were, in these answers, more restricted with many ignoring this important element of the question almost completely. Others claimed almost anything as themes resulting in them appearing to either not understand the term and/or the production itself.

As with Question 02 in this section, a few candidates gave very technical responses using terminology very effectively, and whilst some information on the construction of set can be very useful, this should not be at the expense of assessing how the design helped to communicate the themes or issues.

Question 02

This question proved to be slightly the more popular of the two design based questions and examiners reported seeing some very good answers which demonstrated not only some excellent technical knowledge but also very good theatrical awareness. The most successful answers showed a secure understanding of technology and technological terms and focussed very clearly on "combination"; unfortunately many weaker answers, although demonstrating an understanding of both lighting and sound failed to select moments from the

production where there was a combination and considering effects in isolation became self-penalising.

Good answers linked the effects to the content and intention of the selected performances and gave a precise commentary on effect with some excellent descriptions of how, for example, mood or atmosphere were created or changed, how period or place was revealed to the audience or how the lighting and sound was used to add emphasis to a moment or create or release tension. A variety of moments from *War Horse* such as the appearance of the tank, the death of Captain Nicholls and the channel crossing were used particularly effectively by some candidates in answering this question. Less secure answers lacked precision in their description of the effects and of the particular moments of the chosen productions.

Other productions that students used very effectively included *Evita* where the assessment looked at how the music and the specific sound effects created the excitement as well as the pathos of particular moments and referring with great precision to the way the scenes were lit and how this developed in the course of the piece. *The Woman in Black* and *Journey's End* demonstrated an understanding that the lighting did much more than light the scene, and that the sound effects were sometimes very obvious and sometimes relatively quiet but equally important to the impact of a moment. Whether it was an enormous explosion, a violent scream, the quiet sound of birdsong or the noise of a crowd, good candidates recognised that sound can guide an audience's response, and that the lighting intensity, direction and focus may work in conjunction with this or offer a contrasting effect. Unsurprisingly it tended to be the more dramatic moments that the candidates referred to with only the most able attempting to discuss more subtle moments in, for example, a more naturalistic production, but those that did were often very successful because they had really seen the focus of the question and had responded to it creatively.

Weaker answers sometimes suggested that the choice of production had been made too hastily; one excellent reference to the opening scene or a particular moment during the play was then followed by very general material because this was the only specific moment which related to the question or which the candidate recalled and although it was possible to gain good marks on this question with clear description of effects even where specialist terminology was not fully employed, some answers were let down by an almost complete lack of technical knowledge and especially the necessary vocabulary with which to define the precise effects ("it all turned red").

Question 03

This was the less popular of the two performance questions by some considerable way, although as has been stated in previous reports, candidates should look very closely at the wording of questions as there were many cases reported where they may have achieved better by doing the other question. In this case, the quality of these answers was often governed by how accurately and relevantly the terms "family relationship" and "romantic relationship" were defined and applied. There were candidates who chose *Blood Brothers*, presumably based on the actual title. The fact the twins do not know they are related until the climax of the play, means that the material relevant to how they convey that relationship is somewhat limited. It would be possible to consider how the actors were subtly reflecting their family link but most candidates who chose this play did not go further than stating they are brothers and then describing their performances.

Dancing at Lughnasa and *The Cherry Orchard* provided material for effective and appropriate answers for some candidates, focusing on the precise relationship as portrayed through their physicality especially. Some answers ignored the instruction to discuss the

performance of “two performers”, especially if the chosen play contained a variety of family relationships. Several candidates appeared not to notice that the two performers in this question were supposed to be conveying a relationship ‘with one another’ and several discussed two performers and their relationships with various other characters in the play rather than focusing on one relationship. Provided the two characters had some sort of connection in the play candidates considered this appropriate for ‘family’ or ‘romance’ and they often failed to state which relationship they were interpreting. It was often difficult to see which of the two suggested relationships they were focusing on as many of the relationships analysed appeared to be dysfunctional. Those who addressed the “romantic relationship” usually did so quite well, often starting with the initial meeting or attraction and following the development throughout the play. *Romeo and Juliet* obviously lent itself well to this, and the situation between Oedipus and Jocasta was especially complex!

Examiners were however pleased to report that the majority of candidates were able to discuss the ‘acting skills’ of the selected performers to a greater or lesser extent. Most answers contained at least some reference to vocal and physical expression, considering body language, mirrored actions and physical traits with the best ones showing a real understanding of the ways in which the relationship was revealed through detailed analysis of, for example; pitch, pace, pause, gait, posture and gesture. Weaker answers often spent a lengthy part of the answer on casting which, although it can have a bearing on performance, is not an “acting skill”, in these instances too much emphasis was often placed on the physical appearance or costume of the character.

Question 04

This was by far the most popular question on the paper with over three times as many candidates attempting it as Question 03 and therefore produced a full range of responses from the outstandingly detailed to those that lacked any real awareness as to what constitutes performance skills. Although the demands of this questions were comparatively straightforward it led to more interpretations of the wording than any other. Whilst the intention was that candidates could write about one or more performer using their skills to reveal different aspects of their character, examiners reported seeing: responses that focused on performers in a production who all had different characters; multi-roling actors (which although just about acceptable didn’t really allow the candidates to hit the precise focus); performers who performed different characters; and several actors who performed different aspects of one character. However, where the candidate used these experiences appropriately there were some interesting responses and where the candidate did answer the question as intended, there were some really successful and detailed answers that gave a clear sense of how the character changed during the course of the production and the skills used by the performer to reveal these aspects. Weaker candidates chose to look at different moments from the production and discuss how the performer used their skills at that point without actually seeing whether a different aspect of the character was being revealed.

With this question, perhaps even more so than in Question 03, the references to ‘particular moments’ were often very generalised and lacked a clear sense of a moment in the production when skills could be clearly identified as being used for a particular purpose; where these moments were clearly identified and very importantly, set the action in context, stronger answers really brought to life the experience of the characters in the piece and helped to make clear why there was a change in the actors’ characterisation. Weaker answers tended to be much more generalised and often simply referred to moments when the actor’s emotions changed but failed to consider either why, or how these changes were revealed to the audience. These answers supplied insufficient detail to be wholly effective.

Examiners reported that the real key to success in the question was to develop the contrast and difference and to evaluate the effectiveness of the portrayal of character. Good answers dealt with this very effectively, regardless of the style of the selected play. Weaker answers considered the actor's performances in isolation with limited comparison or sense of the "different aspects" demanded by the question. Centres are reminded that performance based questions do require the candidates to have a vocabulary that will help them to adequately describe the skills of an actor – those candidates who possess this and are able to use a range of adjectives to describe physical and vocal expression, inevitably achieve at a higher level as they are able to bring their experience of the actors' performances to life in a far more sophisticated fashion than the candidate who merely refers to someone shouting to show that they are angry.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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