



**General Certificate of Education (A-level)  
June 2012**

**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 reported seeing a full range of responses to the questions in this paper with many of the answers demonstrating real understanding of the students' chosen productions and suggesting a real enjoyment of the theatrical experience. The best responses recreated the impression both of the piece of theatre seen and of their engagement with and appreciation of it. As in previous sessions there was a wealth of material used ranging from large scale mainstream productions to street theatre and site specific work. Where it was apparent that students had seen a range of work, this gave them the opportunity to select and address the most appropriate theatrical piece to apply to the question set. Where students could adapt and focus their answers to the precise demands of the question the results were rewarding. For those who had not sufficiently engaged with either the focus of the question or had not considered in sufficient detail all the aspects of it, this frequently resulted in a narrower approach and the questions appeared to be too challenging.

Some students chose to write about a production which had been seen as much as two years previously, often leading to an approach which resulted in a very generalised response which did little more than rewrite the notes into paragraph form, presumably in the hope that some of the material would answer the question set. Students who adopt this kind of approach rarely do well, as much of the material included in their answers becomes irrelevant to the precise focus of the question.

Many responses started with a generic paragraph in an attempt to ensure the basic references were included, but if these references are not explored within the context of the question there was a danger, as some examiners reported, in the students contradicting themselves later in the essay. For example plays which were stated to be comedies seemed to be anything but or in the case of the very popular *Lovesong* by Frantic Assembly, some students did themselves no favours by prefacing their answers to Question 04 with a lengthy explanation related purely to Frantic's physical approach, and then only wrote about moments that were entirely naturalistic. Other responses had an introduction which overwhelmed the answer, far outweighing in length and detail the actual answer. The most effective introductions, explained clearly and succinctly why the chosen production was most appropriate for the selected question.

The vast majority of students 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, frequently resulted in generalised responses.

Some of the common issues which caused students to achieve lower marks than might have been expected were:

- An unusually high number who did not take notes into the exam. The notes are not just **allowed** for this paper; the questions are designed to **require** the kind of detail such notes should contain. Nor should they be used as one student did by writing at the end of the response: "To look at the other ways sounds were used please look at my personal notes"
- Notes which were far too vague to add anything to the student's memory of the experience: students must be reminded that they can usefully support themselves with good notes, ideally of more than one production. Some schools/colleges produced excellent notes; some were very thin containing little in terms of detail or evaluative commentary. A surprising number of students wrote in continuous prose,

which infringes rubric and also had the effect of restricting the students to a prepared approach

- As has been identified in previous reports, where students choose to write about 'in-house' productions such as those submitted for DRAM2 or DRAM4, there needs to be sufficient opportunities for them to write with some perception about such pieces; however, the majority were not able to adopt the necessary objectivity when writing about their peers
- Similarly where students wrote about a set text production, many did so as though for DRAM1B, offering preferred interpretations rather than assessing what was seen, and in a few cases swamping the answer with quotations which were not related to any detail of the actual production seen
- Some students had clearly prepared last year's questions in class and this skewed some of the answers. Schools/colleges might be better advised to use recent papers as early examples in the teaching process, rather than in the weeks leading up to the examination
- Students should be reminded that there is a need for a balance between depth and range; answers that only covered two moments, although in considerable detail, were unlikely to satisfactorily fulfil the requirement to demonstrate, for marks in the upper bands, 'many purposeful references'
- Some students did not identify the venue and/or the date, and at least a few that were seen, failed to name the play!

On the more positive side the majority of students showed an understanding of the questions set and examiners reported seeing fewer examples of scripts where the students had chosen totally inappropriate productions on which to focus their answers. Some answers made the examiners want to see the production being discussed or effectively reminded them of details and qualities in pieces already seen. Similarly most answers recognised the need to focus specifically on particular moments in order to make clear what was happening, when, and to what effect. There continues to be some very exciting work produced in this part of the examination which really demonstrates how students have engaged with their course and brought their often extensive knowledge of theatre practice into the responses.

### **Question 01**

Some answers to this question were very precise and the effectiveness of the set had obviously been thought about very carefully before the exam.

Productions such as *Journey's End* provided several students with the opportunity to write with sensitivity about the way the set enhanced the whole experience of the play, giving detail of the way the actors used the exit to the trenches, especially in the final moments, and the practical and poignant use of the row of pegs for the equipment.

Many examiners reported though that too many students who chose this question gave the impression they were going to write about one particular set design, no matter whether it was appropriate to the question or not. Although in many cases the students were able to recognise at least some naturalistic elements within the design, in many others, the term 'naturalistic' was sometimes ignored completely, sometimes applied to totally non-naturalistic features and sometimes, inappropriately, applied to the acting within what was clearly a stylised design.

For some of the productions chosen, elements of the set design that could be considered naturalistic could have been discussed, but this opportunity was missed by some students. *The 39 Steps*, for instance is not an immediate choice for a question on naturalistic design but there are elements – such as the scene in the hotel, or in Hannay's room – where a case could be made for a naturalistic setting for the action. However, students who chose this production tended to focus on the use of trunks to represent the train, or the shadow puppets running over hills and did not manage to shape their chosen production to the question at all. Another popular choice of production, although not strictly naturalistic, was *One Man, Two Guv'nors* where some students did give a reasonable sense of the set for different scenes and although furniture was mentioned and an outline of realistic sets given, there was sometimes no specific information provided about period details, colour, style of furnishings or set dressing. The other failing of many responses was that there was no mention of any action or of particular moments. Whereas some students were able to discuss the waiter falling down the stairs in the above production, there was often insufficient reference to how, for example, the doors were used or the railings in the 'suicide' scene.

Students who commented on naturalistic elements gained some credit, for example by exploring the military theme of Propeller's setting and direction of *Henry V*. However, too often students answered on a production which they had found innovative or interesting in terms of setting, often giving clear descriptions of style, but failing to address the question as set.

In some cases there was so little detail of the actual set design that the style was hard to establish. The answers which provided a good clear and well-labelled sketch were rare; others discussed the **set dressing** only, giving no idea of the walls, floor, entrances, textures, colours, and everything else which constitutes the actual set design. There were some useful, clear sketches, although labelling was often unclear and the position of the audience forgotten by many; however even some of those who did provide a sketch simply drew an isolated chair and table in the middle of an indeterminate space.

The answers in this section tended to divide into those who had obviously thought about the set, considered its style and effectiveness and acknowledged that a professional set is likely to be an integral part of the whole theatrical experience, and those who had a hazy idea of an occasional feature of the set seen but frequently moved on to lighting, props and accessories, rather than focusing fully on set design. Similarly all too often the purposes and aims of the production were not clearly identified or expressed and this resulted in a lot of description without any assessment of effectiveness.

Centres should be reminded of the need for students to see as wide a range of work as possible, in order to prepare them for any possible focus in the design questions.

### **Question 02**

Examiners reported seeing some excellent answers to this question, the best of which showed a very good understanding of sound design, and of the technology which supports it. These answers often focussed on productions which used a variety of sounds and were clearly suitable to discuss the creation of mood and atmosphere. Many Students who tackled this question did so extremely well because they had a clear idea of what a sound design involves and more especially how to define it. Some answers suggested a real appreciation of the contribution to the effectiveness of the piece in creating mood and atmosphere, sometimes using fairly basic but nonetheless precise references to the technical creation of the sounds in order to clarify the assessment. The use of, for example, surround sound, the volume, the ambient effects, were all discussed with the kind of assurance that other students could use when considering an actor's ability to affect an audience in Question 03 or Question 04.

The touring production of *Earthquakes in London* for example gave students the opportunity to address the background effects, the earthquake itself and the music used all in different ways and with equal perception, and many students recognised the contribution made to *War Horse* by the gentle background effects in the village, the power of the noises of war in the battles, the quality of the sounds of the sea during the crossing and the mouth sounds made by the puppeteers when working the horses. *The Woman in Black* produced both very good and focused answers and the reverse; in some cases students devoted much of the answer to commenting on the way the sound effects are introduced at the beginning but never mentioned what the actual sounds are or what mood or atmosphere was created. Whole answers on this play managed to ignore the screams – surely a significant contribution to sound design in that particular production.

The less successful answers were very descriptive and did not discuss the effectiveness of the sounds on the audience. There were some answers that gave lots of detail on background/context, but did not spend an appropriate portion of the answer discussing sound. Some students paid insufficient attention to mood and atmosphere, or outlined effects without giving specific detail of sound quality, timing and the relationship to the development of the production. More specifically, one area of weakness that examiners reported was the lack of detail when referring to the use of music. The quality of the sound, the style of music chosen, what instruments were used, whether it was live or recorded are just some of the details which help to enable someone reading these answers to appreciate what was being used. In some cases students simply said the name of a piece of music; whether modern or classical it is still necessary to define the way in which it was created and used as simply naming a piece of music without defining its style provided the examiner with little indication of how the mood or atmosphere had been created.

Unfortunately, some students appeared to run out of detailed examples at an early stage of their answer and in several cases, resorted to discussing how the lighting was used to create mood and atmosphere – whilst some mention of lighting linked explicitly with sound could be creditworthy, lighting discussed as a separate entity was irrelevant to the demands of the question.

### **Question 03**

As always the two performance questions were the most popular with students with this one being less frequently attempted than Question 04. At their best a real appreciation of physical theatre shone through in many of the answers to this question. Students showed an appreciation of the importance of movement, whether subtle or elaborate, and recognised the need to describe the precise nature of both the movement and the reason for it within the context of the piece; pieces by Frantic Assembly and Kneehigh were chosen by many students to good effect, although some students seemed to find it very difficult to define precisely what was happening in the Wild Bride scene when the hands were being cut off, or in the bed scene towards the end of *Lovesong*.

Unfortunately many students largely ignored the focus here of 'impressive or surprising movement and/or physical skills' seeming to think that whatever a performer does on stage would fit this description! Many answers dealt with performances in very generalised terms and several included vocal work here, spending time writing about material that did not answer the question set. Although some students repeated the terms of the question incessantly throughout the answer, they failed to define what it was that made the movement discussed surprising or impressive.

Examiners also reported reading many responses that made reference to the proxemics of the performers without any clear explanation that led them to believe that students understood the term.

It was often in responses to this question that students wrote in too much detail about too few moments. Some students writing about *Lovesong*, which produced some excellent responses, spent an inordinate amount of time describing (rather than analysing) for example, moments such as the giving of the iPod, sometime extending to over a page of description at the expense of a wider range of 'impressive or surprising' moments.

Where students gave a clear context for the examples, particularly in less well-known productions, this really helped the examiner to visualise the moment; where this was missing, examiners often found themselves trying to do the work for the students. To give a clear sense of the production they have chosen, students sometimes need to adopt a slightly broader approach to questions such as this one.

However, the better answers were able to look at a range of moments, to clearly exemplify the movement seen, show how it fitted the aims of the production and explore the success or not of these skills. Where students' answers were able to demonstrate that a movement was genuinely unusual in terms of the character or the play, credit was given. It should also be noted that whilst most students looked at two or more actors, some did only focus on one, or said so little about the other that the demands of the question were not really being met. Good answers also clearly assessed the impact of the performances on the audience.

### **Question 04**

This was by far the most popular question on the paper and as such produced a complete range of responses with most students demonstrating at least some focus and understanding of the demands.

The most successful answers combined an understanding of the aims of the production with detailed and developed analysis of a range of performance skills in order to clearly show how emotion had been created without merely listing acting skills such as facial expression, voice, movement and gesture. These better answers did not just describe what the performer did,

but explored how successful they were in using their performing skills, often doing so through reference to a variety of moments from across a character's appearances on stage. Several schools/colleges had obviously encouraged students to look at the text subsequent to seeing the performance, with the result that the students were able to comment in detail on delivery of specific lines and key moments.

The most common problem that examiners reported in relation to this question was some confusion from students as to who was feeling the emotions, the characters or the audience. The problem, in some cases, seemed to be a lack of understanding of what is meant by 'convey' – some students interpreted this as meaning 'evoking' emotions in an audience. This had an effect on the assessment aspect of this question as well as the understanding of what the performers did; the use of skills was defined as successful if the audience **felt** a particular emotion while watching rather than considering how successfully the performers **showed** the emotion to the audience. One other aspect that appeared to be becoming increasingly prevalent is the fact that so many students now seem to ignore vocal delivery as a skill. Many identified a particular moment, quoted a line of text, and then gave details of facial expression, body language, gesture and other skills but often ignored the actual delivery of the line itself. The impression given is that having quoted it there is no need to say anything more about it and yet the delivery of the actual text is a vitally important tool the performers have at their disposal. Several students mentioned performers who 'showed no emotion' at specific times – although this seemed inappropriate for the question, these examples would have been valid if the student had mentioned the skills they used while remaining impassive.

The main issue was how clearly students were able to assess the success of the use of skills in creating emotions. A number of answers were rather brief and had vague comments about how successful a performer was or how well they used skills.

However, overall there were many very impressive answers to this question where students had clearly used their own understanding of theatre as a performer to assess the impact a particular production and its performers had had on them.

### **Mark Ranges and Award of Grades**

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

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