

## Topic Exploration Pack

### Practitioners: Berkoff

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## ***Instructions for teachers***

These instructions cover the student activity section which can be found on [page 7](#). This Topic Exploration Pack supports OCR AS and A Level Drama and Theatre.

**When distributing the activity section to the students either as a printed copy or as a Word file you will need to remove the teacher instructions section.**

### **Background**

'If I have a trademark style, I suppose it's about physicality, a simplicity of communication both orally and physically. That's very important' - Steven Berkoff.

Steven Berkoff was born in Stepney, London in 1937, and is still an energised actor, playwright and director. His real name is Leslie Steven Berks, although his Jewish Russian family name was Berkowitz. His grandparents left Russia for England in the 1890s. **Diary of a Juvenile Delinquent**, written by Berkoff, is an informative insight into the Jewish young man, growing up in the east end of London. It will definitely feed your understanding of the poetic violence and excitement of his found in some verse plays, particularly *East and West*.

Berkoff trained as an actor at the Webber Douglas Academy in London and studied movement at the Ecole Internationale de Theatre de Jaques Lecoq in Paris. These two disciplines are key to his creative work. He worked as a mime and physical theatre practitioner at Webber Douglas and first experimented with *The Trial* using an ensemble of students. In 1968, Berkoff formed the London Theatre Group and like another influential actor/director, Laurence Olivier, proceeded to write, direct and perform with his own company. The 1970s were a time of rapid change. With the end of censorship, a new writing culture permeated British theatre. Berkoff featured in his own experimental adaptations of Kafka's *The Trial* and *Metamorphosis*, Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher*, as well as appearing in iconic films of the period. [Hamlet at Elsinore](#) (1964), [Nicholas and Alexandra](#) (1971), [A Clockwork Orange](#) (1971) and [Barry Lyndon](#) (1975).

Social and political change in Britain in the 1980s saw more companies experimenting with a physical type of theatre. They wanted to get away from the restraints of realistic and naturalistic drama. Berkoff wrote a series of plays set against the political landscape of Margaret Thatcher. In the 1990s his adaptations of Shakespeare, notably *Coriolanus*, took his company, East Productions all around the world; and his regular visits to Edinburgh Festival have made him a name synonymous with the creative and experimental fringe. A regular with his one man shows

# DRAMA AND THEATRE

## Teacher Instructions

and ensemble productions of *On the Waterfront* in 2008 and *Oedipus* in 2011, Young companies still bring productions of *East* up to showcase. His body of work is performed globally and he has directed *Metamorphosis* in six different countries using international actors. He has several published books and collections of poetry.

Students who are mainstream film fans are probably most familiar with Steven Berkoff via his portrayal of villains in several big budget Hollywood productions of the 1980s and maybe *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*. Often the biggest student misconception about Berkoff's style seems to be that it involves shouting, the use of bad language and big facial expressions without any truth in physicality or performance. The need to impersonate the actor Steven Berkoff should be avoided. He is unique. In 2014 he toured in his new play, *The Actor's Lament* and in 2015, at 78, he is still actively involved in current contemporary culture. He has re-emphasized his Jewish cultural inheritance in recent years and continues to write direct and perform.

### Theatre purposes and practice

As an actor, director and playwright and general non-conformist, Berkoff wanted to shake naturalistic theatre and encourage experiment using the idea of 'Total Theatre'.

'Total theatre is a use of the imagination. Actors express the genius of the body. Express the story without a set'.

Steven Berkoff said that his career owes much to his training as a physical theatre practitioner, but perhaps equally, to his working class origins, which, he maintains, give him a different perspective to those around him in a predominantly middle class profession.

### Artistic intention

'Coming from a working class background helped me to define things as coming in groups. There were things like the boys' club, the local pool, the park where all the guys used to hang out with the girls – it's an ensemble. I've never lost the sense of the group being important; that's always been part of the work I do, the ensemble, interacting, creating together.'

Berkoff uses self-revelation, almost confrontation, of fears and uncomfortable truths about human nature and sexuality.

'Art should be limitless. The deepest core of our being. We need to expose the demons and we may find something unexpected. Illuminate. Offend. Learn something.'

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Berkoff tells stories in a poetic and heightened way, both vocally and physically using minimal set and a non-naturalistic style with lighting and music. Characters use a mix of poetic language, sometimes Shakespearean, often vulgar and muscular, almost physical. Imagine throwing their words out into the air.

He uses the Kabuki theatre **mie** a picturesque pose to establish your character. It is a great way of putting your character immediately into the Berkoff performance style starting point.

### Working methods

If you are working on a Berkoff text or using Berkoff's style with another text, try this rehearsal process:

- Start with a warm up.
- Learn or refresh a specific technique such as action mime or choral focus.
- Divide your session between ensemble work and detailed character work.
- Only sit and read the play together when you have found your group ensemble and at least your individual character's mie.
- Sometimes Berkoff uses one to one sessions with his actors to work on a scene and sometimes he will focus on detailed choral sequences.
- If you are doing two heavy sessions of physical make the next session vocal work on monologue and language.

### Theatrical style and use of convention

'To make the actors a fundamental part of their environment, to use every actor on that stage to the maximum of their ability and to express something to the utmost of its potential - sometimes literally, sometimes symbolically - so you can go no further with it. If anything, that's what they'd call the Berkovian Style.'

Berkoff's work is influenced by Greek theatre, Japanese Noh and Kabuki, Shakespeare, East End music hall and his Jewish heritage, as well as using the techniques of practitioners like Artaud and Brecht. His own actor training would have included Stanislavski and the techniques used by Lecoq. The use of mime, stylized movement, exaggerated vocal work, direct asides and improvisations within an ensemble environment are all key features.

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## Teacher Instructions

Berkoff's early work is based on classical Greek texts and contemporary modern day verse in an ensemble environment. Berkoff often uses the chorus in a stylised sequence of movement, usually heightened both vocally and physically. Just like a traditional Greek chorus they reflect the mood of the story and express what the main characters cannot say. He uses bouffon as well as chorus. The Kabuki concept of **jo-ha-kyo** is common in Berkoff's work. Scenes are done at a certain pace; the action is slow, speeds up and ends quickly. This Japanese concept governs actions of actors, structures of plays and scenes. To break it down further, **jo** is a slow and auspicious beginning (the way Berkoff often introduces character and plot), **ha** speeds events up (Berkoff often uses this and culminates the story with a moment of tragedy) and **ku** is a short, satisfying conclusion. Many of Berkoff's characters move on quickly after tragedy.

Berkoff takes his inspiration from film, Akira Kurosawa movies in particular.

### Influence on other practitioners

*East* is often cited as the main influence for the 1990s style of 'in-yer-face' theatre, such as Harry Gibson's stage adaptation of Irvine Welsh's book *Trainspotting*, and Northern Stages production of *A Clockwork Orange* by Anthony Burgess. John Godber was influenced by Berkoff, particularly with his play *Bouncers*. Most performers that have trained in Lecoq will recognise the influence Berkoff has had on their theatre making, or recognise him as a significant energy coming from that discipline.

Companies such as Theatre de Complicite applied their style to the reworking of classic texts and created new work in collaboration with writers. In the 1990s young experimental companies such as Volcano and Frantic Assembly developed their now trade mark style, fusing physical theatre, choreography and text. The cross-over between dance and theatre was also explored by dance companies such as DV8 whose work bares resemblance to that of Pina Bausch.

Contemporary companies such as Idle Motion are great examples of young ensembles using physical storytelling for this generation.

### Preparing to teach

#### Resources

This section outlines the resources that support the specification content and will offer you guidance in the delivery of this topic. Each text is hyperlinked so you can view inside the book on the publisher website.

#### [Theatre in Practice: A Student's Handbook \(Paperback\)](#)

This resource has all the exercises you will need to explore as part of this unit with a range of follow on exercises to challenge your students. Chapter 3 on Lecoq is useful background for Chapter 4 on Berkoff.

<http://www.stevenberkoff.com/buy.html>

Berkoff has his own resource site where you can buy his plays, poetry and published books. Several productions are also available on DVD. Suggested preparation for this unit would be a read of the publications below:

Berkoff, S. (2010). *Diary of a Juvenile Delinquent*. London. Arum Press

Berkoff, S. (1995). *Meditations on Metamorphosis*. London. Faber and Faber

There are many insightful and informative interviews of Steven Berkoff available on You Tube.

#### Suitable texts

Recommended Berkoff texts would include *The Trial*, *Metamorphosis*, *Agamemnon*, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, *Kvetch*, *East or Greek*.

Most Shakespeare, Aristophanes and adaptations of the Gothic novel are suitable for studying Berkoff, as are contemporary texts with the potential to explore his style of non-naturalistic theatre.

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## ***Student Activity***

### **Suggested activities**

The following activities will explore the core movement techniques used by Berkoff, physical style to find character and then use movement with the spoken word.

### **Warm up**

**Find a start position and stand in neutral.**

**Look around at the group and balance the space.**

**Start walking around the space.**

**Stretch your bodies by visualising a piece of thread pulling you up from the top of of your head.**

**Remember not to look up.**

**Make eye contact with everyone as you walk round.**

**Keep the movement light footed.**

**Start running into the centre of the room.**

**Keep moving and keep changing direction**

**Avoid touching each other.**

**Move in and out of the centre and finish by seeing how close you can run together without touching.**

**Extend this warm up by adding the functions of an old school DVD player. Move using 'stop' 'pause' 'play' 'fast forward' 'stream' and 'rewind'.**

### **Teaching Notes**

Berkoff trained at L'ecole Lecoq where **mime** is central to his theatre and not as a separate art form. Many still associate mime with Marcelle Marceau who developed mime as a silent individual performance in his own right. Students often start building walls in the air with their palms when you introduce mime. By calling it **open mime**, Lecoq explains that he teaches mime as a **human action**; to rediscover things you do in life and create them in another way. Open mime includes rediscovering objects as well. The gesture must have an emotional connection. Lecoq also uses **action mime** to look at our physical actions. This is a key skill for Berkoff.

### **Student notes**

It is useful to remind you that improvisation comes from memory, whether real or imagined.

Stanislavski uses similar exercises for actors using their imagination. This is more about physically inspired memory and is mimed.

### Activity 1: Movement, mime and body language

Aim: To replay a situation silently, and to physically recover past images by using open mime and memory.

#### a) Replay and play the silent way

Act out the following scene without dialogue:

- Imagine a place that you think you have discovered for the first time.
- Stand at the door and take your time before entering into the space.
- You realise you have been there before.
- Rediscover the place and all the things in it.
- Nothing has changed.
- The images of the past become alive with each object you find.
- Something brings you back into the present.
- You leave.

#### b) Single player first person action

Aim: To look at the main actions and movements of the body and put them into creative context.

Work through the following actions focussing on movement of the body.

- Stand in neutral and keep your knees slightly bent.
- Work out a sequence of action that moves up and down.
- Use bell ringing or lifting a suitcase on top of your wardrobe to practise.
- Break down each stage of the action.
- Work out where your hands need to move and how that effects the rest of your body.
- Keep the movement economical.
- Start slowly and experiment with different tempo or speed.
- Remember to breath.
- Choose one of the following characters:
  - Bronte heroine
  - Futuristic anti- government runner
  - Afghanistan soldier
  - Late night traveller.

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## Student Activity

- Devise a sequence of vertical, horizontal and diagonal actions.
- Give them high energy.
- Think of the dramatic context.
- Give the character psychological reasons for the drama.

Add specific music that puts the sequence in context with the character. This exercise can then be applied to the text you are studying alongside Berkoff's work.

### c) Understanding the burden

Most of the characters in Berkoff's plays are burdened by personal guilt, inactivity, unfulfilled promise or oppressed by society and its conventions.

- Think of a character you have played or would like to play.
- What is their burden?
- Think about how you could show this physically with the use of *action mime*.
- In character gather up your burden and carry it round the space.
- It is heavy and overwhelming.
- Your burden weighs you down.
- You try to get rid of it however it just won't go away.
- Lie down on the floor exhausted by your efforts and relax.
- Sit in a circle and share what you thought your character was burdened with.
- How would this influence the playing of this character?

### Activity 2: Character motif and gesture

Aim to explore the physicality of Berkoff's characters by focusing on his adaptation of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*.

#### a) Finding the mie

- Look at the opening stage directions of *Metamorphosis*.
- Focus on the family characters of *Mr Samsa, Mrs Samsa, Greta and Gregor*.
- Decide which character you are drawn to and find a space on your own.
- Think about the detail of your character's physicality and what they are wearing.
- Make decisions from the information you are given in the stage directions.
- Stand up in neutral.
- Find a pose for your chosen character.
- Your body should be energised and in a state of alertness.
- Think about the detail and precision of your pose.
- Use your whole body and not just your face.
- Your pose or mie must be heightened and non naturalistic.

#### b) Finding the gesture

- Move around the space as your chosen character.
- Think about the shoes you would wear and how that effects your physicality.
- Stop and stand in your mime pose.
- Add the following character motif or gesture:
  - Mr Samsa: light and smoke a pipe.
  - Mrs Samsa: peg out the washing from a basket.
  - Greta: play the violin.
  - Gregor: read an open newspaper.
- Build up a sequence of movement using the character mie, walk and motif.
- Add a drum beat or a piece of music from Puccini.
- Find a chair.
- Individually work out three clear moves that will deconstruct how you sit down and achieve your final character pose.
- Rehearse and perform your character arriving and sitting on the chair.
- Remember to push the physicality to its limit.
- Don't forget your feet and legs.

### Activity 3: The spoken word

#### kvetch

Aim: To explore the muscularity of the spoken word.

Before this exercise you may wish to complete a vocal warm up.

- Find a space and sit on the drama studio floor.
- Think about the last time you moaned about something.
- Turn round to the person sat next to you and have a good moan.
- Now put your moan or complaint into a five line structure.
- Try and get the tone of your moan in the words you use.
- Emphasise the words that illustrate this most.
- Use exciting and rich vocabulary even if your moan is quite ordinary.
- Allow yourself to experiment vocally with volume and tone.
- Stay truthful.
- Stand in neutral and focus out.
- Work the muscles in your face before you start.
- Luxuriate in saying your moaning speech out loud. Start to project your voice and enjoy the new rhythm you have found.
- Now share your **kvetch** as a piece of vocal story telling. Directly address your audience.
- Find the person you originally moaned to.
- You are sat eating dinner.
- Try and chat about your day.
- Did you both resist the need to moan in this heightened style of performance?

### Performance project 1

#### On the Water Front Flash Mob: Pigeon Chorus

Berkoff's theatre adaptation of Budd Schulberg's iconic film used a chorus of longshoremen to heighten the storytelling. The story is set in New Jersey, United States in the 1950s.

#### Preparation

- Research the period the film was set.
- Choose a character. Your character should be part of the workers who have all witnessed the violence and corruption in the story.
- Imagine your backstory. Play a situation silently and physically recover past images by using open mime and memory. Maybe you are an Italian or Irish immigrant working in New Jersey.
- What is your **burden**? Experiment with how that might affect your physicality. In the story many longshore workers witness corruptive behaviour but accept their subservient position rather than risking the danger and shame of informing.

#### Activity

- Find your characters *mie* and *motif*. Use an **action mime** you can repeat.
- Practise the physical process from your group warm up.
- Think about your costume – how will your footwear effect the way you walk.
- Rehearse until your movement is precise and truthful.

Share your work in your lesson. Now add some music. Listen to the Leonardo Bernstein soundtrack from the original film. Try fifties jazz rhythm and blues or early rock and roll. Collectively choose a track that heightens your performance.

#### Activity

- Get into groups and warm up together with '*stop pause play fast forward rewind and buffer*' and a choral focus exercise.
- Now repeat using your chosen soundtrack and in character.
- Add dramatic intention. Why are you running? When you all pause maybe you witness danger.
- Work out a sequence that includes individual character *mie* and *motif* with moments when the ensemble moves together as a chorus. Find moments of stillness too. Be clear on your storytelling.

### Activity

Berkoff used pigeons to poetise and symbolise this group of workers. Imagine you are all in a pigeon loft. Experiment with head and wing movements.

- What kind of pigeon would your character be? Add a sound scape of pigeon noises. Experiment with different levels of sound. What works best in context with the story?
- Decide when the pigeon loft moments could happen in your sequence.
- Discuss what costumes would create a group identity. In Berkoff's production the chorus wore individual longshore costumes with the same beanie hats. Sometimes they wore macs and a trilby.
- Rehearse your sequence several times until you have all got the style at the same level and the characterisation is heightened yet truthful.
- Make sure you are all clear when you are characters and when you are characters playing pigeons.

### Performance

- Plan a public space to perform your **Waterfront Flash mob**. It might be at break in your school or college outside area. Check it out first and get permission.
- Remember Berkoff uses empty stages with minimal set.
- Fix your entrances and exits. Do you enter and start individual *mie* and *motif* or maybe you all run on as a chorus?
- Make sure you have some friends who are not performing to help. They can record your work.

Keep focused and work together to keep the energy high. Stay in character until you all leave the space. Enjoy the experience.

### Performance project 2

#### Food

'Food tends to be a benchmark of every major event in your life...Carrying a memory with you...Food is a blessed relief...A magical substance that you relish...I connect food with work and performance. Theatre and food.'

To start choose a character. It can be a Berkoff character such as:

- Greta or Mr Samsa in *Metamorphosis*.
- Clytemnestra in *Agamemnon*.
- Herod in *Salome*.
- Mike in *East*.
- Madeline in *Fall of the House of Usher*

or any other character you want.

Use white makeup and apply to give a face mask. Use black for the eyes, shading and lips. Complete the exercises to find your character's *mie*.

Think about what you are wearing and how that affects your physicality. For example Madeline would look great in steam punk.

#### Activity

Choose a chair that compliments your character.

- Think about what your character eats for breakfast/lunch/supper
- Be very specific. For example:
  - What cereal?
  - What bowl?
  - What type of spoon?
- Imagine there is a long table in front of you.
- Start eating your food using precise and heightened *action mime*.
- Remember to stay in character.
- Keep your face up and imagine you are sharing your enjoyment out to the audience.
- Take the best five moves and make the eating more of a ritual.
- Keep repeating the same five moves.

Film your work to see how you can improve your style. How does the makeup affect your performance?

# DRAMA AND THEATRE

## Student Activity

### Activity

Relax and think about how you feel about your food. Use rich descriptive detail. Is your chicken succulent and lightly grilled or the porridge moistened with honey? What language would your character use?

Record a close up of your character's description of the food they are enjoying.

### Activity

- Put the spoken word together with your five moves and practise. You need to rehearse and find the right rhythms. Perform the sequence in front of your class. You don't have to wear white makeup at this point but try not to lose the heightened style.
- Get into a group and discuss the different characters you have found. How can they work together as one ensemble? Place your chairs in a line next to each other and facing out. Bring back just your five moves without dialogue. Ask other groups to guess what each character is eating.
- Look at each character *mie*. Which works best?
- Decide on a dramatic situation to provide tension in the group. Maybe Clytemnestra has just murdered Agamemnon in an East End cafe?
- Add the ticking of a clock or a metronome beat.
- Experiment with '*stop pause play fast forward rewind stream*' idea that you use for your warm up.

### Performance

Get into costume and white makeup to perform the whole sequence imagining there is an audience. You could set up the school canteen and perform the ritual one lunchtime!

### Berkoff quotes

#### On Food

'Food tends to be a benchmark of every major event in your life...Carrying a memory with you...Food is a blessed relief...A magical substance that you relish...I connect food with work and performance. Theatre and food.'

#### On Ensemble

'Coming from a working class background helped me to define things as coming in groups. There were things like the boys' club, the local pool, the park where all the guys used to hang out with the girls – it's an ensemble. I've never lost the sense of the group being important; that's always been part of the work I do, the ensemble, interacting, creating together.'

#### On Style

'My style is poetic, expressionistic, exploring the dynamic of society with a heightened level of communication.'

'Total theatre is a use of the imagination. Actors express the genius of the body. Express the story without a set.'

'To make the actors a fundamental part of their environment, to use every actor on that stage to the maximum of their ability and to express something to the utmost of its potential-sometimes literally, sometimes symbolically-so you can go no further with it. If anything, that's what they'd call the Berkovian Style.'

#### On Acting

'Acting in the theatre to restore your soul, your skill and passion.'

'Last actual live form of communication between people.'

'All actors should be writers and directors. The three elements together.'

'Art should be limitless. The deepest core of our being. We need to expose the demons and we may find something unexpected. Illuminate. Offend. Learn something.'

#### On Solo Performance

'It's a love affair with an audience. Like a pianist. A unique communication.'

#### On Kafka's Metamorphosis

'I used Kafka to express me and the production to express Kafka.'

'I wanted to exercise the possibility of an actor being stretched beyond the pale of naturalism.'

### Berkoff Kvetch 1987

We all live under the shadow of the bomb - cancer - carcinogens - illness - unemployment - impotence - fear of fear - blacks whites - police - rates - income tax - parking tickets - forgetting our lines - losing money - making too much money - losing hair getting fat - getting ugly - being stupid - being unwitty - being shy - being foolish - worry about which stereo speakers - how to fix a car - a bike - learning the piano - fear of failing - not impressing - fear of others' strength - fear of weakness - fear of being exposed - not getting to work in time - not having a pension - security - old age - dying - war - injury in road accidents - fear of blindness - deafness - of not understanding the joke - fear of tough people - fear to take risks - fear to swim - to jump - to dive off a board - fear of disease - fear of moving - fear to sell - fear to buy - obsessional fear of spiders - dark cupboards - knives - muggers - fear of people - parties - crowds - clever people - fear of speaking your mind.

**Glossary of Terms**

<b>Base pulse</b>	the rhythm and ensemble movement used in choral work
<b>Bouffon</b>	performance style used by Lecoq drawing on mimicry and the grotesque
<b>Chorus</b>	a group of performers found in Greek drama who comment together on the dramatic action both vocally and physically
<b>Cryptos</b>	the Greek meaning of hidden
<b>Ensemble</b>	a group of actors performing together
<b>Grotesque</b>	a fantastic and outrageous element of bouffon
<b>Japanese Noh theatre</b>	Stylised classical Japanese dance drama using characters masks
<b>Jo ha kyo</b>	kabuki concept where <b>jo</b> is a slow and auspicious beginning, <b>ha</b> speeds events up and <b>ku</b> is a short and satisfying conclusion
<b>Kabuki</b>	a classical Japanese dance drama with elaborate face make up
<b>Kvetch</b>	taken from a Yiddish noun and means to complain all the time, usually with humour
<b>Marche sur place</b>	a stylised way of walking on the spot
<b>Mie</b>	a character pose using a heightened physical style
<b>Strip Mime</b>	a character pose using a heightened physical style a style used in clowning and pantomime
<b>Attitudes</b>	a series of movements to help go beyond natural gesture
<b>Commedia del arte</b>	masked improvised comedy originally from Italy
<b>Counter mask</b>	playing against the emotion a character mask is showing
<b>Identification</b>	finding a character by physical identification with materials and elements
<b>Neutral state</b>	when you are in a state of balance before you become a character
<b>Neutral mask</b>	used to make your body the focus of expression

# DRAMA AND THEATRE

## Student Activity

<b>Base pulse</b>	the rhythm and ensemble movement used in choral work
<b>Action mime</b>	to replay a physical action as close as possible. Also to copy the handling of objects
<b>Pantomime</b>	where gesture alone replaces words and associated with white pantomime/Pierrot
<b>Cartoon mime</b>	performed like a silent movie of images
<b>Figurative mime</b>	the body used to represent objects
<b>Storytelling mime</b>	narrative spoken and used with any of the mime family
<b>Mimage</b>	a zoom into a character's internal feeling
<b>Mimodynamic</b>	movement found from colours, words or music