

Topic Exploration Pack

Practitioners: Splendid Productions

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As part of our resources provision I was keen to ensure that the resources have been created by experts in Drama and in Education. For our practitioner requirement, this included resources which were made by working Theatre Makers about their own company's practice and working methods.

I would like to thank the team at Splendid Productions for creating this resource for OCR to support AS and A Level teachers. This resource has been created by Kerry Frampton and the team at Splendid and talks from their perspective as working practitioners in the field of Theatre.

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This Topic Exploration Pack supports OCR AS and A Level Drama and Theatre.

Introduction to Splendid Productions

Splendid Productions (or 'Splendid' for short) is a theatre and education company set up in 2003 by Artistic Director Kerry Frampton. To begin with we provided practical workshops exploring theatre practitioner theory and equipping students to devise and make work of their own. Noticing the lack of professional live performances available in schools and colleges, we quickly expanded the company and began offering touring productions.

Splendid produce highly theatrical, brain-prodding, entertaining, political theatre for young people, creatively adapting existing texts and devising our own work. Since 2004 we have toured one production per school year alongside an extensive workshop programme. We have also developed a wide range of educational resources that support our practice and stimulate further experimentation.

Splendid consider performance and education work to be equally valuable, and our experience in one area feeds directly into our practice in the other.

Splendid's theatre is structured in a 'Brechtian' way. It is strongly influenced by the theatre of Bertolt Brecht, and there is never any attempt to disguise the theatricality and didactic nature of the work. We are also inspired by many other theatre makers and styles; the joy and interactivity of the classic British pantomime, the economy and beauty of Edward Gordon Craig, the exaggerated characterisation of Steven Berkoff, the anarchy and craft of Commedia dell'arte, the simple relationship between actor and audience described by Peter Brook as 'Rough Theatre', and the emotional truth and precision of Konstantin Stanislavski. Our attitude is, if it works, we'll use it!

This pack explores Splendid's approach to devising theatre, and offers some suggestions and exercises to get students creating their own work using the same principles.

Key facts about Splendid Productions

Creative adaptations

Splendid creatively adapt existing plays/novels/epic poems and turn them into hour-long pieces of Epic theatre using three actors. We structure the work using the techniques of Bertolt Brecht, so it is always episodic, social political, dialectical, humorous and fourth-wall demolishing. The audience are central to the work – as important as the actors – and they are considered first with every adaptation. Each show is unique and exploits the exceptional possibilities of the relationship between actor and spectator. A Splendid show is always an event.

Audiences

Our work is devised with a young audience in mind. These audiences:

- are primarily aged between fourteen and twenty-one
- are drawn from every socio-economic background

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- will have had much greater experience of consuming television, film and internet-based entertainment than watching live theatre
- may not have any prior knowledge of the piece or specific context for what they are about to see.

As a result we create work that:

- has a universal meaning
- demonstrates storytelling using as many uniquely theatrical techniques as possible
- strives to make the experience engaging, entertaining and extremely clear in the telling of the chosen story while prompting wider questions for the audience.

We have found that this is a strong basis on which to produce work that speaks to all audiences.

Purpose and practice

Splendid create beautifully theatrical political theatre. Its purpose is to engage young people and to encourage them to think about the world that they are in.

Since 2004 we have toured creative adaptations of classic texts directly to schools and colleges, as well as public performances in theatres and festivals. We also provide a range of practical theatre workshops designed for students of drama. The performance is very often part of a session that includes a related workshop led by members of the cast.

Artistic intentions

- To demonstrate theatre in its most simple form: an actor communicating an idea to an audience.
- To make accessible, engaging, relevant, debate-provoking performances.
- To develop the relationship between actor and audience in a continually evolving way.
- To encourage audiences to create work of their own.
- To demonstrate that theatre can be created with minimal resources (such as lighting, staging, costume, design) and is available to everyone.

Working methods and theatrical style

Splendid's productions are framed in a non-naturalistic style. The setting and costume is minimal and symbolic, there are no lighting changes or curtains, and the actors are aware of the audience and address them directly. Any theatrical technique can be used in the telling of the story – song, chorus, narration, freeze, slow motion, multi-role, puppetry, physical theatre, projections and placards are all elements we have used regularly.

Within this frame we want to create truthful, relatable characters to involve both the brain and the emotions in the story, so there are always strong elements of naturalism within the performance.

Splendid use juxtapositions of style for a storytelling purpose. For example grotesque, exaggerated characters might turn in a second to something heartbreakingly human and exposed. This switch of style and technique is something we use to shift the audience's perspective on a character or moment, bringing them in (engaging emotionally) or pushing them away (encouraging objectivity) from the action.

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These choices are always deliberate. We know:

- **What** we are showing an audience – character/idea/story/opinion/moment.
- **Why** that thing should be witnessed or highlighted.
- **How** it's done – the technique that we use to do to achieve this (song, exaggeration, direct address etc).

This means that Splendid's performances are rigorously clear and precise, and the meaning and effect of each moment put before the spectator is discussed and decided in advance. Meaning never happens by accident.

Additional teacher preparation

Preparing to teach 'Splendid style'

The student activities provided below focus on ways for students to emphasise and explore the social and political aspects of their own devised work in the style of Splendid Productions.

To equip a group of students to work in a Splendid style, you will need to introduce them to several key theatrical concepts. In many cases we find it useful to use terms coined by Bertolt Brecht to describe theatre techniques, and the activities are designed to demonstrate how Splendid implement these ideas in our own work.

Episodic structure

A piece of theatre divided into well-defined episodes. Each episode presents a point of view or idea clearly. The meaning of each episode should be self-contained, such that episodes could be re-arranged into a non-linear structure without affecting the overall understanding of the piece. Exploiting the episodic structure can interrupt the action, which can be a form of 'V-effekt' (see below).

Montage

Linked to the episodic structure is the montage effect. Montage depends upon witnessing a juxtaposition of ideas/attitudes/images simultaneously or in sequence. It can occur within a single scene or happen when two contradictory angles on the character or story are shown back-to-back. Dialectics work along the same principal: a **thesis** and **anti-thesis** are presented and we then create a **synthesis** of the two ideas in our minds. Montage depends upon the audience weighing up the juxtaposing elements you have shown them.

Verfremdungseffekt (making the familiar seem strange)

The verfremdungseffekt or 'V-effekt' is fundamental to Brechtian theory. Using a theatrical technique you can draw the ear, eye or brain to a specific moment, argument or political point. In order for a V-effect to work it must clearly contrast with what is around it. **Like highlighted text, it must be unmissable.**

Gestus

An attitude or a single aspect of an attitude, expressible in word or action, word and action, or song.

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Spass (German word for 'fun')

In order for the everyday person to sit through a piece of social political theatre, you must make sure that it is also entertaining. Splendid often use comedy, song and other theatrical devices to 'tickle' the audience before delivering them a small thought-prodding 'slap', usually in the form of a V-effekt. ('Tickle and slap' is an expression used by us, but not by Brecht!) This contrast between comedy and tragedy is not a new idea, but as Brecht's work suggested, we can use it as a tool to manipulate our audience and encourage their brains to engage.

Song

Splendid use song as a V-effekt, but it also links to Spass and Gestus. In Brechtian theatre, song can be used to highlight attitudes or social/political comment as well as entertain.

Emotion and objectivity

There is a widely held belief that Brechtian theatre should be devoid of emotion. This is not true. We can use emotion as a tool. We must first bring our audience into the production in order then to be able to distance them from it. The audience should definitely feel something, but also be given the chance to form a reasoned emotional response. Emotion is sieved by the brain.

Multi-role

This is a simple theatrical device which is essential in a small cast. It means that the audience has to keep their brain engaged to keep up with story. However, for multi-role to be used effectively, each character must be easily identifiable. We achieve this with strong physical and vocal clarity, and only very rarely with a distinctive hat.

Cross-casting

A distancing effect for both actor and audience. You can also make interesting social political points when the actor does not share the gender, race or age of the character they're playing.

Puppetry

The audience responds very differently (and often more humanely) to the use of a puppet as a character. In our version of *The Odyssey*, Odysseus was a puppeted wooden spoon, the infant son in *Woyzeck* was a small sackcloth puppet, and in *Antigone* a puppet symbolised the abused human body. Puppets are incredibly useful and emotive. You can explore status relationships, vulnerability and create situations that a human actor could not physically represent.

Exaggerated characterisation

This works to distance both actor and audience. Heightened physical and vocal characterisation can be used to juxtapose hard against characters played more realistically. Splendid use heightened physicality for characters that take up space in society as well as the story.

Repetition

Deliberate repetition of key words, physical actions, or entire episodes. Audiences notice when things happen more than once. Audiences notice when things happen more than once.

Narration

Verbal storytelling direct to the audience. Narration can break the fourth wall, it can interrupt action, and allow characters to comment on their own choices or highlight their perception of events. It can be used to provide a 'spoken subtext' or demonstrate a contrast between a character's public statements and their private feelings.

Chorus

A group of people share one or all of the following elements: movement, speech, focus, argument, or attitude. Splendid's work is flooded with a variety of choral storytelling techniques both vocal and physical. We use it to emphasise character, create atmosphere, reinforce a point of view or draw the audience's attention to a specific moment. Using chorus in a performance encourages complicité between actors and is uniquely theatrical. Historically the Greek chorus provided the narrative bridge between audience and actor; they warn the audience what is to come and comment on what has gone before. They are a theatrical clarity machine.

Chorus of a character

More than one person playing the same character at the same time. This can give emphasis or clarity to a specific characteristic, for example status, class, gender or attitude.

Not-but

A Brechtian rehearsal technique where an actor explores the possibility that their character might choose to behave in one way, but equally could have chosen the dialectical opposite. This notion of what 'is' and what 'could be' is useful for students when creating more rounded characters in their work. You can imagine how it might work for Nora in *A Doll's House*. There are many points where she could theoretically have made different choices. By identifying these moments we can choose to mark them in rehearsal room or in the performance itself.

Splendid actors apply this idea to characterisation. We identify the archetypal roots of each facet of a character. In one scene we can play a single archetype, and in another scene a different archetype for the same character. It is the juxtaposition of these facets, '**not** just x, **but** also y' that encourages the audience to think more objectively about the character they are observing. Nora is **not** just 'the arrogant woman' **but** also 'the loving mother'. Like a jury in a court case, the audience can only base their verdict on a character using the evidence they are presented with. We try to offer not just the prosecution, but also the defence.

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Useful resources

You can find more information about Splendid Productions, including video clips of our work at the Splendid website: www.splendidproductions.co.uk

Films, scripts and supporting materials for Splendid's creative adaptations are also available to purchase from the website: www.splendidproductions.co.uk/shop.

OCR provides resources on many of the theatre practitioners mentioned in this pack.

<http://www.ocr.org.uk/qualifications/as-a-level-gce-drama-and-theatre-h059-h459-from-2016/>

These are some of the books we have referenced when making our work:

- *For Brecht:*
Esslin, M. (1959). *A Choice of Evils*. London: Methuen. ISBN: 978-0413547507.
- *For devising and making simple beautiful theatre:*
Brook, P. (2008). *The Empty Space*. London: Penguin Modern Classics. ISBN: 978-0141189222.
- *For inspiration and play these books have served us well:*
Spolin, V. & Sills, P. (1999), *Improvisation for the Theater*. Illinois: Northwestern University Press. ISBN: 978-0810140080.
Callery, D. (2001). *Through the Body*. London: Nick Hern Books. ISBN: 978-1854596307
Alfreds, M. (2007) *Different Every Night: Freeing the Actor*. London: Nick Hern Books. ISBN: 978-1854599674.
- *This tiny useful book makes sure that what we are saying in our work is rooted in truth:*
Caldarone, M & Lloyd-Williams, M. (2004). *Actions: The Actor's Thesaurus*. London: Nick Hern Books. ISBN: 978-1854596741.

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Activity 1: Chorus of character

This exercise uses several of the techniques described above.

In small groups (of 3-7), students should choose either:

- a well-known person, ideally one who causes debate or controversy. (Katie Hopkins, Justin Bieber, Rhianna and Donald Trump are examples that work well in 2016.)
- a character from a play that they are studying (this is an excellent rehearsal technique for all styles of theatre).

Get the students to identify two juxtaposing aspects of the chosen person/character's personality. One aspect should be something obviously negative and the other should be positive. (They can take into account that judgements of good and bad depend on who is making the judgement. Donald Trump for example is not just 'the villain' but also 'the saviour' depending on who you are talking to. Both attitudes are true, perhaps in the same moment.)

Everyone in the group creates a static physical and facial mask for the negative aspect, eg. 'the villain'. The clearest version is selected and the students display this in identical chorus. Encourage them to extend the physicality to its furthest point so that it no longer looks naturalistic. Each part of the body should be stretched so that in silhouette alone the archetype is clear.

The group then decides on a phrase that the person might say, or a line from the play that supports the negative view of their chosen character. (Donald Trump, 'the villain' might say 'Let's build a wall to keep the Mexicans out!') They should also decide on the attitude of this extended character towards the audience. (Who do the audience represent to Donald Trump? His supporters? His enemies? His friends? Casting your audience adds to the clarity of what you are playing and why.)

Working as an identical chorus, the group performs this line. The vocality should be as extended as the body – body shape dictates the breath of the actor which will then power the voice. Keep challenging the students to extend what they are doing. Make sure they identify one of the group as leader of the chorus so that they start and finish together, and encourage them to have a clear beginning and end to this moment of chorus, returning to neutral.

Once this is rehearsed and clear, move on to the juxtaposing archetype. This version of the character will be presented using a juxtaposing performance style, with an 'honest voice' and a smaller physical shape, although the archetype and its attitude towards the audience should still be clear.

Still working in chorus, the students create a naturalistic moment of honesty using a single line. This can either be a juxtaposing alternative line or phrase, or they can use the original line with a juxtaposing intent. In the Donald Trump example, they might play Trump 'the saviour' telling his close friends 'I just want to make America great again'.

The students then perform their juxtaposing episodes to the other groups.

To develop the exercise further, the students could consider such directorial questions as:

- How could they use gesture to add clarity of intention for each characteristic?

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- What happens if they experiment with the proxemics of chorus to audience?
- How they could use their entrance, transitions and exit to amplify and clarify each archetypal quality?
- Could they use the exercise to expand a key moment in a text, or as a starting point to a longer devised episode?

Using stylistic switches and juxtaposition, this exercise offers the audience a clear view of two sides to the same character, provoking debate about them and what they are like. It encourages the creative use of varying theatrical style and applies choral technique to a single person.

Activity 2: Episodic storytelling

Choose a classic fairy tale, play or news story in small groups. Divide the story (or a part of the story) into three clear episodes. Give each episode a title that describes the content of that episode. Where the students choose to start and end their story is entirely up to them.

Example using *Cinderella*:

Episode 1 – Cinderella is bullied by her Stepmother and Sisters.

Episode 2 – Cinderella's Fairy Godmother magically arrives.

Episode 3 – Delighted Cinderella goes to the ball.

Picking one of the episodes, the students should choose a theatrical technique from the list below and apply this to the performance of a specific episode. The aim is simple, clear storytelling, making sure that the key elements of plot are not lost under the theatrics. They should choose an appropriate technique to communicate the episode clearly.

- 1. Chorus of reaction** – a group of people (outsiders) react in chorus and narrate that episode of the story from a more objective point of view. In *Cinderella*, the people at the ball could describe what they witnessed as Cinderella arrived and met the Prince, identifying the clear facial expressions associated with this to encourage clarity of attitude. (Splendid normally use six clear facial expressions: happiness, sadness, anger, fear, shock and disgust.) You can relate this to back to the Brechtian term Gestus.
- 2. The Villain's point of view** – In order to give the spectator an alternative opinion, can we view an episode through the eyes of the antagonist? In *Cinderella* the Stepmother is often painted as a monster. To put across a more human aspect we might:
 - Have the Stepmother narrate the episode using a more naturalistic physical and vocal characterisation, or the subtext of the episode from her perspective
 - Experiment with the position of the character in relation to the audience to encourage sympathy.
 - As in the previous activity, we could juxtapose the character's public nastiness ('I hate Cinderella!') with a moment of private honesty ('I wish I was young again').

Students should consider anything that challenges the archetype of the 'villain'. This links back to the Verfremdungseffekt in Brechtian theatre, allowing the audience to see something in a new light.

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- 3. Breaking the Fourth Wall** – Experiment with involving the audience directly in an episode either vocally or physically. What purpose in the narrative could this serve?

In *Cinderella* the audience could become dance partners at the ball, each being told tiny fragments about the mystery woman dancing with the Prince, or the spectators could become the magical items transformed by the Fairy Godmother.

Bringing an audience into a scene is always interesting and exciting, but the students should be clear about who the audience are, what function they are fulfilling, and why this is a good idea. What effect does this have on an audience? How could they make that involvement something that could provoke thought or debate?

- 4. Actor as object or scenery** – narrate an episode from the point of view of an object or environment who witnessed the action. In *Cinderella*:

- How would a grand ballroom speak about Cinderella in comparison with the simple kitchen here Cinderella lives?
- What would Cinderella's broom say if it could speak? What if all the actors played the broom and swept up the audience while telling them what she has 'gone through'?

As it is clearly not 'realistic', this technique automatically promotes objectivity on events. It can create comedy (which relates to Brechtian 'Spas'), but can also assist in making a wider socio-political point (Cinderella's shiny and expensive glass slipper might not wish to be placed on the foot of someone so poor and insignificant). It gives students the challenge of solving a theatrical problem: how exactly do we portray a grand ballroom?

- 5. Removing language from the episode** – the actors create the characters, scenery, props and costume for an episode without relying on language. Instead, they use onomatopoeic words, stretched sounds, plosives, pitch, tone and clear intention to communicate narrative, atmosphere and meaning.

In Commedia dell'arte this is called 'grammelot'. This is language of nonsense that is nonetheless understandable to everyone. We often reference the work of the psychologist Albert Mehrabian, who stated that communication is made up of the following elements:

- 38% tone of voice
- 55% body language
- 7% words.

This technique demonstrates that language should not be solely relied upon to communicate meaning.

The students then repeat the process for the other episodes, choosing a different technique from the list or devising one of their own. The three episodes are then rehearsed and performed.

To develop this exercise, students can consider the following questions:

- How does the order of the episodes affect how an audience understand the story? Could you start at the end of the story? Does a non-linear story give a new perspective on events?
- How can they use the titles to assist with clarity? How can they be presented (eg. on placards, in chorus, spoken by a specific character, or the actors out of role)?

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- How can you make the transitions between the episodes as important as the episodes themselves?
- Is the intention behind each moment clear?

This exercise gives students a firm grounding in devising. It allows them to structure something tightly, explore clarity of intention for an audience, experiment with theatricality and make a piece quickly and creatively. It demonstrates practical ways both to adapt material creatively and highlight political questions within a story. This is the essence of Splendid's style of theatre.

Activity 3: Gestic song

'In the dark times

Will there also be singing?

Yes, there will also be singing.

About the dark times.'

Bertolt Brecht, *Motto to the 'Svendborg Poems'* [Motto der 'Svendborger Gedichte'] (1939), trans. John Willett, in *Poems*, 1913-1956.

Songs are key to Splendid's style of storytelling. We use them to break up narrative, to uncover hidden truths, to make political points or simply to offer a juxtaposing opinion. Songs have the potential to entertain an audience and break their hearts. We like to do both.

Taking a play, famous story or news event, ask the students (in groups of 3-7) to choose a specific scene or moment within the story. Ideally this should be a moment that they feel strongly about, or something that contradicts the standard interpretation of the event. (For example, in the original epic poem *The Odyssey*, the character of the cyclops is portrayed as a vicious monster despite the fact that he is innocently minding his own business when Odysseus and his men invade his home and eat his cheese. Why is it that the cyclops is the villain and not Odysseus? This question and desire to contradict the orthodox view was the starting point for our creative adaptation.)

The students should then decide on one of the characters involved in the scene. The exercise is then developed from this character's point of view. The group should work out what that character would want to tell an audience in their chosen moment and decide on a clear attitude (a clear *gestus* towards the situation) in which to frame this: happiness, sadness, anger, fear, shock or disgust.

Bearing this attitude and viewpoint in mind, the students now pick a well-known song. If necessary the words can be altered to make them fit the situation. An example: in *Antigone*, in the moment after Haemon is forbidden to see Antigone again, he could sing a gestic song. One option would be to express the sadness of heartbreak using a sad, heartbroken song (how about *Without You*, as sung by Mariah Carey). Another option would be to create a V-effekt by having Haemon juxtapose the emotion he feels with an upbeat, cheerful song (for example *Happy* by Pharrell Williams). What the song expresses must still be truthful to the character in that moment, so in this example the words would need to be changed (perhaps the word 'happy' is replaced with the word 'gutted', and the other lyrics altered appropriately). A happy-sounding song made sad makes the familiar strange.

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The students then perform the song, demonstrating a clear attitude, as a chorus of their character. The performance can be exaggerated and even choreographed so long as this does not become more important than the intention behind it.

To develop the exercise further, the students could consider:

- What effect choosing a different attitude (*gestus*) towards the chosen moment would have.
- Choosing a song that juxtaposes completely with the tone of the surrounding scene.
- How they might transition between the scene and the song.
- Writing their own original song.

With all of the above exercises, encourage the students to consider:

- **What?** What are they showing/telling an audience?
- **Why?** Why is that important?
- **How?** How can you use a theatrical technique to communicate your meaning?

If the work is technically good but does not communicate an idea clearly then it must be re-worked. Splendid aim to make the clearest work using the simplest ideas. For us, devising is a process of defining and refining our meaning. We always recommend using obvious solutions. The obvious thing is often the clearest thing, and clarity must be at the heart of the theatre we make.

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