

AS LEVEL

Candidate Style Answers

DRAMA AND THEATRE

H059

For first teaching in 2016

Section A – Question 3

A Day in the Death of Joe Egg

Version 1



QUESTION 3 – A DAY IN THE DEATH OF JOE EGG

- 3 “My family is my strength and my weakness.” Explain how a present-day director could approach the performance text to emphasise the social attitudes towards family at the time the performance text was written? Justify your ideas with examples from at least three scenes from the performance text you have chosen for this question.

[20]

SAMPLE ANSWER

A Day in the Life of Joe Egg was written in 1967 and presents an account of a young couple's experience of life with their severely disabled 10 year old daughter, whom her Father Bri describes as being “a human parsnip.” The pressure that this puts on their marriage is huge and exacerbates the issues that Sheila has with her husband being over protected by his mother Grace.

As a director I would want to show the different styles of parenting that are presented. Sheila is a modern woman who, before her marriage, experienced the sexual freedom that women in the 60's were able to enjoy for the first time. Sheila talks about her experiences openly but not without guilt. She has a fear that her promiscuity is in some way to blame for Joe's disability, like she had ‘choked back motherhood’. I would show her freedom by having her move in a fluid way, but stopping often to show that she is having to curb her real personality and play the role of a mother. This could further be brought out by her costume, perhaps she wears a short skirt as is in keeping with the 60s but with a housecoat over the top to show how motherhood and family life has reined in her behaviour. When she talks about her guilt about her past I would show her distress by having her move away from Joe and wring her hands and rub her hands over her body as if she is trying to rid herself of the sexual contact she had. I would want the audience to sympathise with her and recognise how strong she has been in adapting to becoming a mother and taking care of her unresponsive daughter. When she talks to Joe, her language is full of superlatives and signs of affection - ‘my flower, my petal’ and I would show how physically close she is to Joe by having her reassure her with touch constantly. Of all the characters on stage, she is the one who connects the most physically with Joe and looks directly at her the most often. She is not embarrassed of her daughter or frightened of her. Proximally I would ensure that she is often the closest to her daughter. This would highlight the difficult situation that families raising a disabled child would face and would challenge the audience to think about their own preconceptions. Sheila refuses to let Joe be sent away and locked and shows a protective love for her daughter as a person who has feelings and responses far beyond that of a ‘human parsnip’. In spite of this fierce maternal love, she is still able to laugh about her daughter and engages in a typically British use of humour to hide the horrific reality. It would be important not to over sentimentalise the character of Sheila and her direct address to the audience is both honest, warm and shocking in its content. I would encourage the actress playing Sheila to use a somewhat brash accent and have her looking exasperated to show that she is very much a human heroine and a character the audience can identify with as an unglamorous and ‘normal’ woman.

The often comic tone to the play means that the section where Grace and Sheila argue feels all the more serious for its contrast with the lighter hearted scenes that have come before. This exchange is short but vicious and I would emphasise the tension it represents between the two women by having them speak in sharp voices, louder than usual and without the self constraint both usually show. Pam and Freddie could reflect the audience's discomfort by looking horrified and upset by the outburst. The fact that their first exchange is short-lived with both characters immediately ‘spent’ shows that they are unable to have the healthy and honest exchange that would probably clear the air. They both move around trying to avoid the tension that has bubbled to breaking point over the past ten years of swallowed opinions and grievances. I would emphasise this by having Sheila move around the room ineffectually tidying and trying to make order of the mayhem. As she touches the plants and cages around the room we should see her getting some kind of comfort from what her Mother in law views as mess and clutter, this embodies the fact that Sheila ‘embraces all living things’ and shows her to be instinctively maternal if not in the traditional way. I would have Grace moving more slowly, looking helplessly at the chaos that she sees around her. She knows better than to touch anything but the audience should see how much she would like to help. Perhaps she could go to assist and then drop her hand on a look from Sheila. This would reflect the larger situation of how she would love to be able to ‘fix’ the problem with Joe and

make things better for her beloved son but is unable to. This again connects to the idea of family being a strength and a weakness. I think the audience should recognise that her over parenting has made Bri the way he is, but we should also feel some sympathy towards her and recognise that she acted from good intentions.

Another key scene is where Bri and Sheila are back in their home –his mother and their well meaning socialist guests offering ‘support’ from a slightly disgusted an fascinated distance. Bri has packed his bags and made the decision to run away from manhood and the responsibilities which drag him down. Sheila arrives home with Joe earlier than expected and greets him with the passion and love that he has been craving throughout the play. I would have Sheila looking tired but pretty –perhaps with an extra button undone and her hair falling down from its pony tail. She should touch Bri with as much love as she showed towards Joe earlier and circle around him as she pushes him to the centre of the stage away from Joe, the menagerie and the plants that clutter the edges of their home. Bri’s desire to be the centre of everything is then fulfilled. Her actions would mirror his at the start of Act One where he returns home. I would want the audience to believe that their family unit could be healed and they could find a way to move on and survive the stresses that their situation has put on their relationship. For a moment, I would have Bri looking back at his wife and not resisting to develop the audience’s relief that he will do the right thing and ‘man up’. However, when he picks up his case and walks off, leaving his daughter alone the stage, we can see that in real life happy endings do not always take place and recognise that society, friends and family have failed to save this family even though they were given a second chance with Joe being brought back to life. I would want the audience to feel some level of sympathy towards Bri - the monologue that preceeds it is honest and shows the enormous pressure that fell on his shoulders before he was ready to carry it. This could be delivered directly to the audience, breaking the fourth wall and with an honesty. I would have him having a handkerchief in his trouser pocket, this is in keeping with the 60s but would also show that he is hiding deeper emotions as he pauses to wipe his nose. He should pause regularly to show that he is thinking deeply and we should hear the emotion in his voice that he protects himself from by breaking into a comic persona.



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