



# Performance Studies

**A LEVEL**

**Performance Studies:  
John Godber**

Topic Exploration Pack

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This Topic Exploration Pack should accompany the OCR resource ‘John Godber – Chat’ learner reference, which you can download from the OCR website.

 *This activity offers an opportunity for English skills development.*

## Introduction

John Godber was born in West Yorkshire and trained as a Drama teacher before starting his career in theatre.

Detailed information about Godber's life and work can be found on his official website:

<http://www.johngodber.co.uk/index.html>

Godber's earlier physical work uses 'Theatricality'. This is shown in a number of his plays studied in schools today. Godber's work embraces the expressionist style, particularly the German school. Godber cites Buchner's *Woyzeck* and Kroetz's *Stallerhof* as influences, notably for their short scenes.

In regards to elliptical dialogue he references seeing Pinter's *The Birthday Party* as a student. He later went on to write a piece inspired by Goldberg and McCann's 'short and snappy' dialogue, the result was an unpublished play *Tall, Short and The Fall* which eventually resulted in *Bouncers* in 1977.

Imagination, elliptical language, character and transitions are four key elements of Godber's early work. These are concepts of 'Action Theatre' that students should be aware of, as seen in *Teechers*, *Bouncers* and *Shakers*.

## Activity 1 - Imagination

"With your imagination we are in a car. In a way that graphic is there like a cartoon. I am French with a moustache "bonjour!" The intellectual dynamic between the performer and the audience creates an illusion. The play is not explained to the audience ('this is a play called *Teechers*, we shall perform this play for you now'), it is presented. Excessive explanation demystifies the play, destroys the audience's suspension of belief. Conversely, introductions like 'I'm going to tell you a story', don't break context, allowing the audience to sink into the play, letting the illusion build up around them.

*Teechers* uses a minimal set – the actors have to build a set in the imaginations of the audience, as well as that of themselves. Godber states 'I wanted to produce a play that relied on the same bare essentials that a drama teacher might have in school... with these basic ingredients anything

can happen in a drama lesson'. He notes that 'the result is often staggering'. In this sense, *Teechers* is about **the power of imagination – both that of the actors and the audience.**

Plays like *Teechers* and *Bouncers* provide the audience with a framework with which to use their imagination. In modern media such as film and television, an incredibly complete image of a character is what reaches the audience, (think of adaptations of literary works, where the television version changes how you think of a character.)

To contrast, the visions of character presented in Godber's plays are frameworks for the audience to imagine upon and around, layering their own concepts and perceptions on what the actor presents to them.

## Task 1

There are different levels of character in *Teechers*. For example: Gail, Salty and Hobby are three dimensional characters, whereas other characters have less depth and rely on caricature and stereotype to create something instantly recognizable.

For Godber "Story is king". Take each of the following characters:

- Mrs Parry
- Mr Basford
- Miss Witham
- Miss Prime
- Doug

Create an action to go with a piece of dialogue in the play. e.g. Mrs Parry; "Drama, bare boards and a passion" – a coloured prop scarf could be swept over a shoulder. Introduce these as part of the first 20 pages of the script in a dramatic run through.

## Task 2

Create a comparison chart of the speech from Henry V and the opening speech from *Up 'n' Under*. Which lines is John Godber referencing in the opening to the play?

**Extension Task:** Look at the scenes featuring Spud Turgoose in Godber's *Up 'n' Under*. Find and examine the reference to Spud using his 'imagination'.

**Spoken by Chorus, Henry V, Prologue:**

O for a Muse of fire, that would ascend  
The brightest heaven of invention,  
A kingdom for a stage, princes to act  
And monarchs to behold the swelling scene!  
Then should the warlike Harry, like himself,  
Assume the port of Mars; and at his heels,  
Leash'd in like hounds, should famine, sword and fire  
Crouch for employment. But pardon, and gentles all,  
The flat unraised spirits that have dared  
On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth  
So great an object: can this cockpit hold  
The vasty fields of France? or may we cram  
Within this wooden O the very casques  
That did affright the air at Agincourt?  
O, pardon! since a crooked figure may  
Attest in little place a million;  
And let us, ciphers to this great accompt,  
On your imaginary forces work.  
Suppose within the girdle of these walls  
Are now confined two mighty monarchies,  
Whose high upreared and abutting fronts  
The perilous narrow ocean parts asunder:

Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts;  
Into a thousand parts divide on man,  
And make imaginary puissance;  
Think when we talk of horses, that you see them  
Printing their proud hoofs i' the receiving earth;  
For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings,  
Carry them here and there; jumping o'er times,  
Turning the accomplishment of many years  
Into an hour-glass: for the which supply,  
Admit me Chorus to this history;  
Who prologue-like your humble patience pray,  
Gently to hear, kindly to judge, our play

## Task 3

*“You go to the theatre and the opening will set out the rules for the game of theatre, these are the rules of the game.”*

**John Godber**

The opening of a play establishes an audience’s understanding of the play to come. Identify language in the prologue of *Teachers* that lays out the ‘rules’ for watching it.”

## Activity 2 - Elliptical language

### Task 1

Discuss with a partner what you both did at the weekend. Now try and express the same detail by taking the alternate dialogue down first to two words each, back and forth and then to only one word each.

Notice how the audience are made to fill in the gaps.

Is anything lost by **NOT** having the words there?

What is the impact upon the audience?

Discuss how the use of thought tracking and role-play within the still images enabled the students to explore the characters further.

### Task 2

Students to create a whole group still image of a disco. (With a larger class this could be done with the class split in two)

Split the class into groups of teachers and students, and have them create short role plays for their characters at the disco.

## Activity 3 - Character

### Task 1

John Godber said “It is crucial you understand how other people feel emotionally.”

Ask the class to reflect on what it is like to be blind. Expect answers such as ‘you can’t see’.

Blindfold a student and have a partner guide them around a short course around the room.

Alternatively play a game of Blind Man’s Buff, or run a number of small activities each with a ‘blind’ participant in different parts of the room.

Ask the question again, to the student(s) who was blindfolded. Hopefully they will have greater insight than ‘you can’t see’.

Godber describes this exercise as a ‘simple way to show how other people feel’. He observes that “Characters are feelings”.

Discuss how the experience of ‘blindness’ would affect how that student might play a visually impaired character.

### Task 2

“Characters are feelings” John Godber

Read through the first four pages of Act 2 of *Teachers*, and using thought tracking, express the feelings of the characters.

### Task 3

Use hot seating to explore what had happened in school to make characters feel outsiders and ‘average’.

### Task 4

This is a variation on an exercise used by Jacques Lecoq. Have students rehearse the prologue of *Teachers* wearing a simple blank mask.

Discuss how an actor begins to over compensate for the inability to add facial expression.

Then, rehearse the same section without the blank mask but keep the exaggerated physicality, and discuss points at which the mask necessitated that.



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