

DRAMA AND THEATRE

Teacher Instructions

Topic Exploration Pack

Practitioners: Gecko Theatre Company

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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 Gecko for creating this resource for OCR to support AS and A Level teachers. This resource has been created by Gecko Theatre Company 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

Gecko was founded in 2001 and is now an award winning and internationally acclaimed company. With an expanding ensemble of international performers and makers, Gecko creates work through collaboration, experimentation and play. The company have taken part in theatre and dance festivals all over the world from Bogota to Beijing, performed extensively across the UK on the national touring network and recently made an original work for BBC TV.

The company is truly international, comprising artists, technicians and office staff from England, Ireland, Canada, France, USA, Colombia, Australia and more.

Characteristics of a Gecko production:

- intense physicality
- emphasis on ensemble
- athletic movement.
- action rather than text
- different languages
- inventive staging
- multifunctional props
- lighting from unusual sources
- multilayered soundtrack
- visually exciting
- design is both aesthetic and functional
- surprises
- open to interpretation.

The company's Artistic Director is Amit Lahav. Amit was born in Israel and trained as a physical theatre performer before working with several dance, visual and physical theatre pioneers, including Lindsay Kemp in his touring productions of Variété and Elizabeth, Steven Berkoff, Ken Campbell and David Glass in Unheimlich Spine, Off The Wall and Blue Remembered Hills. He was a key member of Glass's Lost Child Project working to create shows with marginalised children in Argentina, Brazil, Cambodia, Italy, Laos, Thailand, England and Vietnam.

Amit says, *'I wasn't influenced by any one person or any singular style. I just had a burning desire to make work and to express myself. I am influenced by everything I see and everything I experience – the relationships in my life, by film, theatre, dance; I think that I'm influenced all the time so I could definitely not say any one particular thing.'*

His interest in physical expression began when he made theatre with street children in South East Asia, and understood that the shared language was physical, visual and expressive. There was no shared spoken language or cultural reference, therefore he realised this was the kind of expression he wanted to explore in his own work.

Gecko find inspiration all around us, in our personal lives, in the news, politics and in relationships we have with our friends and family.

Full versions of these Gecko shows can be viewed on Gecko's website, www.geckotheatre.com

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2003–2005 *Taylor's Dummies*

A chance encounter with a mysterious woman throws Taylor's world into turmoil. Eloquently crafted to music, *Taylor's Dummies* plumbs the depths of male desire, through a series of visual scenes that are both stunning and deeply emotional. Sharp suited performers walk up walls and fly through the air, life-sized dummies come to life, and a baby doll sings 'Fly Me to the Moon'.

2005 *The Race*

One man is on a collision course with his future, sprinting to the most important moment of his life. But will he be ready? What will he feel the moment he sees his child's eyes?

2007 *The Arab and The Jew*

Allel Nedjari and Amit Lahav grew up on opposite sides of the Arab-Israeli divide. Here they celebrate their brotherhood and laugh and cry at their reflections. *The Arab and The Jew* is both a riot of sound, image and movement and an ambitious dance of reason and reconciliation.

2009 *The Overcoat*

Inspired by Gogol's short story, *The Overcoat* creates an intoxicating world where a man's thoughts and dreams spill out into everyday life. In a futile government, Akakki falls in love with the beautiful Natalia. His feelings for her are not returned; this drives him to be the best and win the ultimate office prize – the overcoat.

2012 *Missing*

Lily's soul appears to be decaying. She is very successful in life and love but something is missing. The shadows of Lily's past invite her, along with each audience member, to consider how far they have strayed from who they are and where they come from.

2013 *Institute*

What does it mean to care for one another in a busy world of high-pressure targets and expectations? What does it mean to lose everything and everyone? Where do you turn? Four male performers, portray four very familiar human beings, each driven by a desire to care and be cared for.

2015 *The Time of Your Life*

A live 30 minute performance by Gecko created especially for BBC Four.

The Time of Your Life has an ordinary man at its heart. Desperate to feel different and to find a real human connection in a world consumed by social networks and mass advertising, the man embarks on a journey through rooms representing different milestones in his life. The rooms are transformed using powerful visual effects to create an increasingly vivid world for the viewer that disintegrates as quickly as it appears.



The Time of Your Life, © Richard Haughton

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Purposes and practice

Gecko's intention is always to make theatre that is 'visual, visceral and ambitious, and to create work that inspires, moves and entertains' audiences. Very little text is used but the piece is 'written' and 'storyboarded' like any other piece. The company uses different visual styles to explore themes and characters in the rehearsal room and in performance. 'For us, it's about using whatever tools we have as performers, designers and writers to bring these powerful moments to life.'

Gecko's style is holistic, meaning that all its parts exist as a whole. There are five main devices operating at the same level – choreography, lighting, sound, design and 'performing style' (of each performer). These all have totally equal responsibility in telling the story. Gecko's most powerful storytelling 'device' is the ability to pull all these elements together in every single moment of a show.

When an audience sees a Gecko show, they experience a very imaginative world, which is full of contrasts. Every part of the show is like a painting: it's very beautiful, and each moment is crafted very carefully so each event and the outcome are unpredictable. There are always tricks; things that will emerge from unexpected places.

'All I know is the theatre that I make, I don't have any other way of expressing myself – the fact that it happens to be globally called physical theatre never really crosses my mind. I suppose one way I could express this is to say that I am committed to finding ways to engage people imaginatively without the use of text – this means that all ideas I have, pass through the lens of Gecko theatre, which happens to be called physical theatre.'

The shows are very athletic: they are demanding both physically and emotionally. Performers spend a substantial amount of time training in all ways to prepare for performances - this involves yoga, fitness, meditation and sport. The shows require the precision of a musician in an orchestra and the aggression of a boxer!

Use of language

Although Gecko is committed to finding ways to engage people imaginatively without the use of text, spoken word is an important element of all Gecko productions.

'I love language and I am fascinated by the use of voice in performers. I wouldn't ever want to make a show where performers couldn't use their voice, but I've never been interested in using English and language as the main form of communication between the pieces and the audience.'

Having international performers who can use their own languages, and to have a range of different languages on stage has become something that works very well for Gecko.

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The Gecko process: Amit Lahav offers advice on creating a devised performance

The process for all the shows starts by allowing the initial thoughts and ideas, scenes, characters - whatever these might be - to emerge. This process can take a long time and you have to be patient. You have to be alert and ready to pick up the 'emails' as your brain sends them through.

At a certain time you have to organise these ideas and to understand their value. These ideas slowly build up to something, slamming together when you have no idea what the result will be but they will always take you on another journey.



Gecko Institute, © Richard Haughton

The final concept can take a long time to come together, once it has we will then start creating and designing the physical and technical elements associated with all Gecko shows.

Then it has to be tested out with an audience. We don't think 'let's put it together and just see how it is to play in front of an audience'; it's much more significant than that. The audience is as important as any element of the show, like a character, a performer or the lighting... and their response instantly changes what the show is.

Because of the long process, everything is an influence in some way - so many things can impact on the process. It's a little bit like standing in front of a blank canvas; you might have an initial idea, then you might read a book or watch a film, you might have an argument or have a dream, or something else might encourage you to think 'there needs to be a chair in the painting'. When you add in the chair you realise that the table no longer works so the focus becomes about a coat stand, which then needs a coat to bring the coat stand towards the chair. The same concept applies when we're creating a production; we start with a blank canvas.

Everything happens together. It's not like a conventional theatre process where somebody is in a rehearsal room with a script and then they add the lights. All the various elements have to happen together, so those things are being thought about from the very first day.

The main language for the audience is not words. Language comes from the same place as movement; it is an emotional vehicle but it is not the only means by which the audience understands the storyline. It is visual language, which interests me more.

As with all Gecko shows, the first performance represents a new start and trajectory for the piece. I find it almost impossible to know a show until the audience interacts with it.

Making a Gecko show is an incredibly organic process, woven around a simple timeline structure. Within that basic timeline there is an enormous potential for the piece to grow organically with all performers and makers contributing. The company work meticulously on the functionality of the show such as, moving a screen at exactly the time as moving a person and a chair and a light. Nothing that is designed is purely aesthetic – everything is functional.

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The process is very singularly led by Amit, but simultaneously very collaborative.

Anna Finkel (Gecko performer) says 'With Gecko, the creative process involves a lot of rapid fire devising. We will be given an idea about a scene and have twenty minutes or so to work something out, then we move on to another scene. In dance we tend to work with a high amount of detail right from the beginning of making movement. With Gecko, the emphasis is more on broad brushstrokes that help us get a feel for a scene or movement vocabulary. The process then involves putting those scenes together one after the other and adjusting them as they create the narrative and carry the story through. The movement is less fundamental than with any dance work I've done. It carries less weight, so when performing a scene I am more preoccupied with what is being communicated and that's where my focus lies.'

Additional teacher preparation

Visit www.geckotheatre.com where you can:

- find out more about the company by watching interviews with the team
- download the text of each interview
- watch past Gecko shows in their entirety
- find productions photographs and trailers from all Gecko productions.

The student tasks are connected mostly to *The Overcoat*. Sessions can be teacher led or groups can share the role of leader/director, swapping with each task.

The Overcoat should be watched in full before beginning the tasks. Watching a performance on screen is obviously very different to being in the theatre and experiencing the full impact of all the rich elements that contribute to Gecko's productions. However, the recording provides a good record of the production and taken together with the director's commentary (located in the education section of the Gecko website) students can absorb a strong flavour of Gecko's work.

Watch on as large a screen as possible, ideally projected, in a room with blackout and good sound.

Experience suggests that it is useful for the students to watch the production more than once to achieve a deeper understanding and critical awareness of the production when addressing examination requirements.

Director's note

In January 2008, I read *The Overcoat* and felt inspired and excited by its potential. At that time, I made the decision to put down the book and forget about it. Having been gloriously infected by the story, I wanted to enter a phase of creativity and to explore, in Gecko's style, the potential symbolism and imagery of the piece.

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I searched for a visual, physical and metaphorical 'Gecko world'. I cannot say for sure which parts relate to, or are inspired by specific images or aspects of Gogol's story – that was not of particular interest to me – just a relentless pursuit of this 'world'.

Since the inception of the company, I have always seen Gecko creating work that is European in style. 'Taylor's Dummies', our first show, could easily have been conceived in the minds of Polish or Russian contemporaries.

My grandparents were Russian. Although encounters with them were very early in my life, my grandfather managed to foster a fascination of their lives and their struggles through pictures and stories. Maybe this explains the origin of some of Gecko's imagery and mythology. It may go some way to placing the company comfortably in terms of style, in the arms of Nikolai Gogol.

The story is simple and emotionally driven, which is crucial to our style and full of theatrical potential. Working from this basis, all is possible and imaginable.

'One of my fascinations is with physicality, the juxtaposition between an external/ordinary world and the internal/emotional world – and how this collision can be explored and theatricalised. The external world for the protagonist is grey, hard and cold. His internal world is full of anxiety, lust and shame. To me, his inner world is reality and truly who he is – his external world a shell, conforming and conditioned to behave in certain ways.'

Amit Lahav

Gathering resources

Music is essential to Gecko's work to provide a soundscape which underscores the action. Collect music in a variety of styles, from different time periods and a range of artists. Instrumentals are useful but sometimes an individual song can be particularly powerful. Experiment with music by setting the suggested preparation tasks against some of your selected tracks. The soundtrack does not have to compliment the action. Sometimes a contrast or contradiction can be very effective.

Understanding 'The Overcoat'

The Overcoat by Gecko is based on a Russian story by Nikolai Gogol. The full performance can be viewed on the company website www.geckotheatre.com

A Gecko production doesn't rely on text or a script as such, but rather on a series of images and ideas that are constructed through movement, sound, lighting, staging and dialogue, though this is rarely used in a conventional way. Many characters speak in language other than English.

In discussion with audiences after Gecko shows, some people will always ask what the company intended to communicate through certain images, such as the fluttering paper or the mysterious figure with the hand. Their reply is always the same... 'what did it mean to you'. This is part of the joy of their work.

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If you struggle to *understand* every moment in the performance you will probably *not* find your own meaning. If you think differently to your neighbour, discuss your opinions – you're both right! It's not a test! Just watch, absorb and enjoy the use of TOTAL theatre. If you don't understand it all, that's all right. If you don't like it, that's fine too. Just try to be open to new ideas.

Here are some points to think about as you watch the production. Make a few notes as you watch then share your responses. Remember, there are no right or wrong answers.

Focus on WHAT YOU SEE, WHAT YOU HEAR and HOW IT MAKES YOU FEEL.

- Akakki's Wedding. How do we know it's a fantasy? What goes wrong?
- Akakki's room. His landlady needs rent. How is the room created on stage? What does the room feel like?
- A voice from on high. Who or what does the hand represent to you?
- The office. How is 'work' depicted? What are Akakki's feelings towards his job and his colleagues?
- The group go off together after work, what is it that excludes Akakki?
- Landlady 'disco'. How does Akakki feel at the end of this scene?
- How is this exaggerated through the images on stage?
- The coat. What does the coat represent for Akakki? What does the coat represent to you personally?
- Akakki visits the 'Taylor' who offers him a different coat. Who or what do you think this character might represent?
- Akakki tries to win the coat but he loses out. What do you feel for Akakki?
- What sort of deal do you think he makes to finally get the 'coat'?
- Akakki sings 'Rags to Riches'. How and why do you think his character has changed?
- What seems to happen now that he has the coat?
- His success soon turns sour? Why do you think this happens?
- How would you explain the final sequences?

N.B. Gecko's character Akakki is based on Nicoli Gogol's Akaky Akakievitch Bashmachkin in *The Overcoat*.

Audience reaction to *The Overcoat*

The company's onstage world is a gloomy one. Dimly down lit in stark whites and greys through copious stage fog, government clerk Akakki (Amit Lahav) and his colleagues work hunched over tiny desks in isolated pools of light. The furniture is hard iron, the walls are streaked with grime and the ensemble's faces are shaded in stylised black and white.

Gecko excels in creating small moments that capture wordlessly the individual's emotional struggle - Akakki battling against a crowd of bustling newspapers that seem to suggest the whole world is against him, as they assault him on the street; his parents' faces at the window of his tiny bedroom apparently overlooking and judging everything he does.

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The music supports the constant rhythm of fast-changing physical and psychological actions. Accompanied by the sound of typewriters and wooden seals, and electrical bulbs going on and off, the clerks are going through yet another stressful day... The pictures are painted with bodies, with music and light, and the time and place of action change with the speed of imagination as in a flawless film montage.

And a bed would not be only 'a bed', you made magic from all the ordinary things. I'll never forget how Akakki was breathing ... the whole room and things were breathing with Akakki, as if the teapot and the photo in a frame were his only friends. And at that moment, sitting in your seat, you think- 'oh, that's the real theatre, definitely!'

Once you've watched the production and discussed your thoughts, return to the website. In the education resources section, you can listen to Amit's fascinating and revealing commentary, as both artistic director and performer, on some of the key moments in *The Overcoat*.

<http://geckotheatre.com/resource-pack/>

In the same area you can watch more interviews with Amit and members of the Gecko company, which offer some very helpful advice on performing and devising in the Gecko style.

Preparation tasks

Gecko's style is both physically demanding and honestly emotional. You should commit a hundred per cent to every moment. In devising workshops, it is important to enjoy a sense of play, but equally important to respond with total focus and intensity.

Experimentation, making discoveries, finding out what excites or means something personal to you, experiencing and engaging in different types of theatre will broaden your theatre practice vocabulary and open up creative possibilities.

Always start a session with preparation tasks. Being 'IN THE ROOM', which to Gecko means being absolutely ready, fully focused and totally committed, is absolutely vital.

Whilst these preparation tasks lead into each other, the intention is that the activities should *build* over a number of sessions. Repeat tasks frequently but move through the levels as you become more confident and adventurous.

Share the responsibility for leading the tasks. There are several levels suggested, but be creative and try out your own variations. Make a note (paper, photo or film) of interesting and successful moments.

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Preparation 1: CLAP!

Repeat each task several times to improve speed and technique. Be accurate and give your total focus.

Level 1

- The group should stand in a circle with feet slightly apart in neutral position. Pass a single clap around the circle as quickly and efficiently as possible.
- Send three times around circle. Time and improve with better focus and teamwork.
- A faces B and initiates a single CLAP with the aim of BOTH partners clapping at EXACTLY the SAME time. B turns swiftly to face C and so on until the CLAP has been passed successfully. Make eye contact. Watch hands.

Level 2

- As above, but either partner can initiate a DOUBLE CLAP, which sends the CLAP in the opposite direction.

Level 3

- As above but leader sends a second CLAP in other direction. Group must work together to avoid the two CLAPS crossing paths.

Preparation 2: Freeze!

Level 1

- Group moves around the space. Move on GO. Call CHANGE of direction, or FREEZE. FREEZE should show alertness. Show readiness for action, but absolutely NO movement.
- Increase speed through the gears from 1 to 10. Avoid making physical contact.
- Repeat. Make visual contact (but not physical) with each person as you pass (a smile, wink, nod, blink). Greet and respond.
- Move in straight lines only. Justify your changes of direction.
- Pick up other individuals as you move around the space to create groups of different sizes which constantly change.
- Stop and start at random, sometimes as individuals, sometimes as a whole group. Don't plan, but respond intuitively.

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Level 2: LOOK

- Director moves around space. Adds a CLAP and command LOOK. Group turns immediate to face the position of the CLAP. Focus on the clap.
- Respond to various intensities of CLAP with facial expression and body language.

Level 3: With emotion

- Add a breath which echoes the intensity of the CLAP
- Carry this emotion into MUTTERING as you move off. Change and respond to next CLAP
- Director defines an emotion eg Frustration, excitement, surprise, despair, joy, contentment. On command, FREEZE and EXPLODE with emotion.
- Build this uncontrolled emotion from inside so that the outward expression is of how you feel.
- Move off only when you feel ready.

Level 4: TOUCH

- Add TOUCH, with which groups move together over three seconds to form a small group (three to five) and make contact.
- No hands. Be inventive. Commit.
- Respond to the tone in the command TOUCH (urgent, tender, angry)
- Carry emotion into MUTTERING as groups split and move off in their own time.
- Gather individuals as you move through the space to increase the size of group.
- EXPLODE with uncontrolled defined emotion as a whole group.
- Reduce response to breath only.

Performance projects

Performance project 1: Identity

How can you convey ideas on *identity* through each of these preparation tasks? Here are some options:

- > *Move and Freeze* = conformity v branching out
- > *Look* = embarrassment v confidence
- > *Hands* = forming and breaking relationships
- > *Touch* = marking moments, bonding
- > *Muttering* = interior thoughts v exterior actions
- > *Emotions* = finding control and balance

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- Build your ideas into a loose narrative and experiment with music.
- Consider how the transitions work between moments in *The Overcoat*. In your own sequence, experiment with slow motion transitions, a quick snap or an overlap.
- Develop the scene into a short sequence. Aim for 3-5 minutes only.

Performance project 2: Giving objects life

Props provide Gecko with a great opportunity to play and be creative.

Look again at Akakki's 'breathing room' from *The Overcoat*.

Who lives in the room? How will the audience know? Collect together a selection of random objects that might be found in your character's room.

- Actors take on the character of an object in that room.
- Objects can 'breathe' with the central character.
- Objects can move with the central character.
- Experiment with different emotional states for the character.

Here are some choices you could make.

- > Objects reflect and intensify the emotional state of the character.
- > Objects drive the character on an emotional journey.
- > Objects show the emotions the character is hiding.
- > Objects slowly move the character into a different room.
- > Objects slowly distort into objects other than themselves.

Performance project 3

- Take a newspaper. Divide it into sheets.
- Loosely shape into a variety of objects. (Do not try to represent them realistically).
- Develop this into a sequence where these objects shift, morph, explode, reassemble out of a seemingly everyday situation.
- Use these 'creations' to suggest hopes, fears, dreams or nightmares for a central character.

Performance project 4: Alice

Explore moments from *Alice in Wonderland* or *Alice Through the Looking Glass* by Lewis Carroll.

- Experiment with shifting between the familiar and unfamiliar.
- Find opportunities to experiment with change of mood and pace.
- Look for exciting contradictions, contrasts and juxtapositions.

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- Try using different musical tracks to underscore the action. This might not obviously compliment the moment. Such contrasts can be very exciting.
- You might choose to apply the moments that Alice faces to your own experience or to episodes that are more topical in today's society.

Performance project 5: Transitions and transformations

Watch *The Time of Your Life*, which Gecko created as a piece of live TV for the BBC in 2015. There is a particularly ambitious sequence which plays out one life in a few minutes and was filmed live in one continuous take by a camera in the centre of the action.

Then move onto this scene from *As You Like It*: Act 2 Sc7

*All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages. At first, the infant,
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.
Then the whining schoolboy, with his satchel
And shining morning face, creeping like snail
Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad
Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier,
Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard,
Jealous in honor, sudden and quick in quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon's mouth. And then the justice,
In fair round belly with good capon lined,
With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,
Full of wise saws and modern instances;
And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts
Into the lean and slippered pantaloon,
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side;
His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide
For his shrunk shank, and his big manly voice,
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes*

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*And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.*

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/All_the_world%27s_a_stage

- Select seven images that seem relevant to you today.
- Focus carefully on managing the transitions between these seven sequences.
- Play with sequencing so that the structure is not linear. Reverse, Rewind, Fast Forward, Repeat and Extend the action to reveal a variety of outcomes.
- Bring together the Gecko's methods you have explored into a short stage performance?

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