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A LEVEL
Candidate Style Answers

DRAMA AND THEATRE

H459/31
For first teaching in 2016

Q7 Level 5 (top) - sample answer with commentary: Hedda Gabler

Version 1

www.ocr.org.uk/drama

INTRODUCTION

This resource has been produced by the A Level Drama and Theatre assessor team to offer teachers an insight into how the assessment objectives are applied. Please note that this resource is provided for advice and guidance only and does not in any way constitute an indication of grade boundaries or endorsed answers. The sample assessment material for this answer and commentary can be found on the A Level Drama and Theatre web page here: http://www.ocr.org.uk/Images/242806-unit-h459-31-analysing-characters-for-performance-sample-assessment-material.pdf

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SECTION B QUESTION 7

Analyse a live performance you have seen, outlining the director's interpretation and how effective you think it was. At the start of your answer state the name, venue and date (month and year) of the live performance you have seen. **[30]**

SAMPLE ANSWER

The Edge Theatre's production, on the 15th September 2016, saw director Katie Abrahams present her vision of Ibsen's Hedda Gabler to a sell-out audience.

In another of Ibsen's plays, An Enemy of the People, a character states, 'The majority is never right. Never, I tell you!' This line seems to have been very much at the forefront of Abrahams' vision as she directed this Victorian play for a 2016 audience. Whilst traditionally, Ibsen's plays are often presented in the realist style that they are written in, Abrahams went against the majority and injected a new twist often favouring stylised devices rather than naturalistic ones.

Whilst the Victorian playwright did not set a specific time period for this play to be set in, it was written in 1890 and it appears that the playwright wanted to show a woman who is challenging the gender stereotypes within a patriarchal Victorian society. Hedda had to be seen as revolutionary and different to other women during this period. It was clear that Abrahams wanted to convey this idea and she rejected the 1890s setting. Instead, she chose to use a contemporary set design on the traditional proscenium arch stage. The use of a curved glass table in the drawing room, which looked like something from a designer boutique, not only showed Hedda's expensive tastes, but showed that she had a taste for objects that were contemporary - when placed next to the traditional style rugs, it cleverly showed a fusion of tastes and ideas - much the like the fusion and juxtaposition between Hedda and her new husband - both have very different ideas about life and showing that Hedda seems torn between two different ways of living - one as a wife in a bygone age and one as a woman who has been born into a society where women are starting to witness new forms of freedoms. Whilst Abrahams had not set her production in the nineteenth century, her subtle mise en scène details such as the coffee table had effectively portrayed Hedda as a character who goes against the majority whatever age she is presented in.

Ibsen's play is written in naturalistic style with realist conventions and it is for this reason that the playwright has become known as the 'father of modern realism'. Yet, despite the playwright's use of realistic speech and believable characters, the director of this production clearly chose to reject a naturalistic approach when staging the drama. Katie Abrahams' set appeared minimal and stark rather than detailed and believable, using on a few symbolic props and stage items. However, whilst some may argue that this approach flouts Ibsen's detailed staging directions, it could be argued that the director has followed a realist intention. Realists, unlike naturalists, were not afraid to be a little unrealistic. They were not slaves to detail and did not always require sets to be believable in detail - indeed the artificial, garish plastic flowers in the vase at the start of the play were far from realistic. It is a brave decision to go against Ibsen's detailed stage directions, but the bold decision was effective. It focused more attention on the important symbols such as the pistols and the portrait. Even the configuration of such symbols on stage was purposeful, with the pistols always remaining close to Hedda when she sat down, or her father's face (in the suspended portrait) always pointing in her direction as if constantly influencing her thoughts.

In contrast to the stylised set, the director had clearly worked hard with the actors to ensure their acting style was naturalistic or believable and, with this acting style, the actors created the idea of an imaginary fourth wall for the audience and, whilst watching the emotional climaxes, we did feel like voyeurs peering into events in the Tesman house. This was developed even further by the venue's proscenium arch stage - the arch literally provided a frame around the drama. The actors' abundance of credible non-verbal expressions such as small gestures, or Hedda's inappropriate giggling, or her repetitive humming or tapping of fingers when bored were also ways of injecting more realism into these characters in a performance. They seemed like believable humans with real emotions. Yet the cast's realism contrasts sharply with the minimalism of the set, meaning that we focused upon the humans rather than inanimate

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stage objects. The minimalist, almost postmodern, approach with design enabled the audience to fully focus upon the characters and their decisions and actions; we were challenged to think about women's positions in society rather than focus or become absorbed upon small set details.

Whilst the spoken parts of the script did tell the story and convey the drama, often audiences bring their own conscious interpretations or meanings to a performance. It was clear that the director had cleverly tried to use vocal intonations and inflections to influence how an audience interprets Hedda and some of Abrahams' ideas were not always mainstream or conventional. For example, when Ibsen's play was first performed, one critic called Hedda 'a monster in female form' and throughout the years Hedda has often be seen as villainous and contemptible. However, Abrahams went against this mainstream view and instead tried to persuade us of Hedda's vulnerabilities. The director tried to use Hedda's vocal inflections to present a woman being suffocated by the society around her, to the point where she seems less confident and uncertain of the world in which she lives. The actress playing Hedda often said statements quietly and with an inflection at the end. Such a vocal delivery helped to portray Hedda as a woman who, whilst may appear bold and confident on the surface, underneath she is actually uncertain and bewildered by the world around her.

The use of proxemics furthered this unusual, yet effective, interpretation of Hedda as vulnerable. At several points, the other characters seemed to circle Hedda and entrap her almost like predators circling their prey. It was a clever use of blocking to convey the idea that society was suffocating and trapping this woman because she wanted to experience freedom. This pattern of stage movement was repeated at many points in the production and became more frequent in the final act, when Hedda is at her most trapped. The proscenium arch further enhanced this feeling of entrapment with actors never stepping beyond the arch, as if confined to their space and roles.

As Ibsen wrote, 'The majority is never right. Never, I tell you!' It seems that Katie Abrahams was exactly right when she went against the majority and brought in her own unique style to this version of Ibsen's classic.

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Commentary

There is a sophisticated and consistent evaluation of a range of dramatic techniques and conventions in terms of set and acting style. Examples are detailed and there is a full understanding of how creative and artistic choices convey meaning. There is accurate and appropriate use of technical vocabulary, coherent, logically structure and a sustained line of reasoning – with the candidate referring to how the director chose to stylise elements in contrast to the realism genre of Ibsen's play. This approach is laid out in the introduction and sustained throughout the writing. There is a highly effective knowledge and understanding of the genre or the play, the play itself and its social and cultural context. Ideas are fully explored, justified and evaluated. Theatrical analysis is mature and highly detailed.

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