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Candidate Style Answers

DRAMA AND THEATRE

H459/31
For first teaching in 2016

Q1 Level 5 – sample answer with commentary: Hamlet

Version 1

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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.

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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 A QUESTION 1

How could the tension between TWO characters be communicated to an audience during the opening scenes of a performance? Justify your ideas with examples from the opening scenes from the performance text you have chosen for this question. **[15]**

At the start of your answer write the name of the performance text you have chosen. Choose 1 of the following:

Theme 1: Conflict

Hamlet – William Shakespeare

Black Watch – Gregory Burke

Necessary Targets – Eve Ensler

The Long and the Short and the Tall – Willis Hall

Oh What a Lovely War – Joan Littlewood

SAMPLE ANSWER

In Act One Scene Two, we see Claudius address Hamlet for the first time and, in this address, the audience need to immediately see tension between the two men. The audience must realise that, in this tragedy, Shakespeare paints Claudius as the antagonist or the adversarial role against Hamlet whereas Hamlet is the tragic hero with tragic flaws.

Claudius and Hamlet have to be portrayed as opposites in order for the audience to see why there is conflict between these men. They are very different. Claudius manipulates fortune and takes what is not rightfully his - he also admits that he would do this again and does not show guilt or seek absolution for what he does done. Yet Hamlet struggles with his conscience and always has doubts. The two are polar opposites and Shakespeare would have wanted them to be performed in a contrasting manner.

One way of showing the contrasts would be to have Claudius remain upbeat, jovial and lively - he questions Hamlet as to why, 'the clouds still hang on you?' whilst he must seem happy and in a celebratory mood. Claudius' body language must show his energetic and lively nature - he should hold his head up high and seem energetic and determined in his speech. He should speak loudly and should make eye contact when he addresses Hamlet - he is not man who regrets his actions even if they were morally wrong. In contrast to Claudius' merriment, Hamlet should appear sullen and depressed. Hamlet's head should be kept lowered; he should avoid eye contact with Claudius. His answers should appear surly and sarcastic in tone, 'I am too much i'the sun.' Hamlet should stand aloof and separate from the action, perhaps in a corner of the stage as if more of an onlooker than a participant of the scene. Whereas Claudius must dominate the stage space as if he owns every part of the area. His actions and gestures must be expansive and intrusive.

To Hamlet, the tension he feels for his uncle is not just personal. (At this point in the play, Hamlet does not yet know that Claudius has killed his father.) To Hamlet, Claudius represents something more than an Uncle who has killed his father, he also represents the decay that is present in the Danish society and so Hamlet should remain completely distanced from the group in the opening scenes - he does not associate himself with them. Claudius' actions in taking the throne prove that the society is corrupt and weak - he has not been challenged. Hamlet knows that, as Marcellus said, 'something is rotten in the state of Denmark' and wants to disassociate himself from this at the start. Therefore, spatial positioning should be used to show this.

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It should not be until the end of Act One Scene Two, when Hamlet delivers his soliloquy (and all the other characters have exited) that he should move to a central position onstage or even downstage near to the audience and deliver his lines. Before this, he could remain in the background. During the soliloquy, he reveals his private feelings about this conflict and how affected he is by them, he even contemplates suicide, 'O that this too too solid flesh would melt, thaw and resolve itself into a dew, or that the everlasting had not fixed his canon' against self-slaughter.' By sharing such a private feeling, the playwright was trying to create a close relationship between spectator and character and make the audience feel sorry for Hamlet because of these tensions. Hamlet needs to therefore speak directly to the audience and even make eye contact with them breaking through the fourth wall.

Another source of tension between the two is the fact that Claudius has usurped the role of Hamlet's father. Much to Hamlet's annoyance, Claudius does try to assume a fatherly role when around Hamlet - this could be shown through gestures. Claudius could place a fatherly hand on his shoulder when addressing Hamlet, perhaps even arrange his clothing in some way or direct him to stand up and not slouch. Each time this happens, Hamlet should recoil from any touch or try to move further away from him.

Despite Claudius' joviality in this opening appearance, the audience do need to understand that he is the villain of this play and this is evident in his words. Claudius speaks using contradictions such as talking of his late brother's death, yet also then talking of joy due to his marriage, 'mirth in funeral'… 'dirge in marriage.' To reveal this contradictory and confusing aspect to the role, the actor could vary his use of intonation patterns, using rising intonation for lines which refer to happiness and falling intonation for the words which have darker connotations. This would help the audience to see Claudius' unreliable and villainous aspects of character and make them understand the conflict and suspicion that Hamlet feels towards this man.

Words are Hamlet's weapons rather than action at this point in the play. Yet these words also highlight his inaction. Whilst he speaks, Hamlet could stand propped against a wall, perhaps slumping or leaning on something for support. He does not yet have the strength to act and can only use words to battle against Claudius. He could even laugh as he delivers lines to Claudius as if trying to deliberately antagonise and annoy him with his words.

Claudius' relationship with Hamlet's mother has to add to the tension in the opening scenes. Some critics have even interpreted it from a psychoanalytical perspective and said that Hamlet is in love with his mother or harbours unnatural feelings towards her. If he does, this could create even more tension between Claudius and Hamlet. In a performance of the opening, it needs to be clear that Hamlet is angry and hurt that his mother now loves Claudius and he detests their 'incestuous' relationship. Each time his mother plays along with Claudius' joviality, Hamlet should seem sickened. He could make small gestures such as clenching his fists, rolling his eyes and scowling.

However, when portraying the conflicts between the two characters, it is important to note that Shakespeare's villains were not always completely evil. As well as being the antagonist, Claudius does have the capacity to be charming; Gertrude seems completely charmed by this man and supports him. Claudius does seem sincere in his love towards her and there are moments when Claudius can seem as if he does care for Hamlet. Therefore, in a performance in the opening scene, the portrayal of Claudius should show some tender moments, such as when he gives Hamlet a compliment, 'tis sweet and commendable in your nature, Hamlet, to give these mourning duties to your father.' Even if he doesn't mean these, the actor needs to show a tenderness and charm - one that would attract Gertrude and fool others rather than portray him as completely antagonistic towards Hamlet. He could speak quietly for such line trying to infer a close relationship and smile as he says it.

Level 5

Commentary

The answer deals with the idea of tension between the characters of Hamlet and Claudius and also the tensions within the roles. There is focused and effective knowledge and understanding of the text and the essay starts with a well-written summary of the relationship between the Prince and his uncle. A clear argument and line of reasoning is established in that the characters should be played as opposites or contrasting. A range of performance conventions are explored including body language, use of proxemics and vocal dynamics providing a wide range of examples of how artistic choices influence performance and interpretation. The second part of the essay loses focus on the argument created moving onto Hamlet's relationship with Gertrude and Gertrude and Claudius and their relationship but the focus is still on how this creates tension between Hamlet and the new King.

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