

A LEVEL

Examiners' report

DRAMA AND THEATRE

H459

For first teaching in 2016

H459/21/22/23 Summer 2022 series

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Introduction

Our examiners' reports are produced to offer constructive feedback on candidates' performance in the examinations. They provide useful guidance for future candidates.

The reports will include a general commentary on candidates' performance, identify technical aspects examined in the questions and highlight good performance and where performance could be improved. The reports will also explain aspects which caused difficulty and why the difficulties arose, whether through a lack of knowledge, poor examination technique, or any other identifiable and explainable reason.

Advance Information for Summer 2022 assessments

To support student revision, advance information was published about the focus of exams for Summer 2022 assessments. Advance information was available for most GCSE, AS and A Level subjects, Core Maths, FSMQ, and Cambridge Nationals Information Technologies. You can find more information on our [website](#).

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General overview

For the most part, the examination for Component 21-23, Exploring and Performing Texts, ran very smoothly this series, despite covid challenges. Examiners reported seeing some very exciting and engaging performances. There was evidence that previous reports had been helpful and acted on, leading to many improvements.

Administration

Examiners reported that most centres provided smooth and efficient administrative arrangements and were pleased to meet any requests by examiners.

The paperwork required is important and most centres met the deadline of seven days for sending the examiner the required documentation. As a reminder, the items required are as follows.

The concept pro-forma for each candidate as a hard copy. Electronic versions are not acceptable. The pro-forma must be signed by the candidate and centre confirming that the work is that of the individual candidate alone.

The running order is very important for those centres with more than one group and must have candidate names and candidate numbers and be organised in order of performances.

Photographs of candidates in costume are essential and most centres provided these rather than pictures of the candidates when they were in year 7! When visits resume photos can be provided on the day and do not need to be sent in advance.

The seven-day deadline for documentation and concept pro-forma is in place to ensure parity for candidates and to give examiners sufficient time to mark the concept pro-formas in advance and to prepare their paperwork for the marking of the performances. It is important for examiners to have an idea of the intention of candidates in their performances, and this aids examiners' understanding of what candidates are doing.

There will be occasions where last minute illness, or someone leaving the course shortly before the performance, leaves the group needing a non-examined person to step in. Covid-19 caused this to happen in a small number of cases. This must always be approved by OCR in advance, and when visits resume evidence of this approval should be given to the examiner before the performance taking place. Centres were efficient at notifying the examiner in this series if there was a covid related absence and how that had impacted any performance.

Apart from this, the only time a non-examined candidate may be used is if a particular section requires a sleeping partner and it is impossible or unreasonable to use one of the other candidates. This should be rare. It is important for centres to know that apart from these two examples, the use of non-examined candidates must not occur.

In normal times it is a requirement that the centre provide an audience for performances. The specification gives details of the nature of audiences permitted. Despite covid restrictions, many centres still had an audience. Some audiences, where the entry required more than one performance group, were made up of the actual examination class, taking it in turns to perform and to watch their peers. Some centres also had other classes watching from younger years or potential GCE students. Some centres had invited candidates' parents and friends to watch, all masked. Peer audiences were very well-behaved and supportive, as were the invited audiences. Examiners reported how an audience can help candidates respond and how it can enhance the atmosphere.

In normal times it is a requirement of the specification for the performance to be filmed and then chaptered if there is more than one group being examined. This year, it was the only way candidates could be examined. The film must be placed on a DVD or memory stick in a format that can be easily viewed on a DVD player or computer. The DVD or memory stick should then be sent to the examiner as soon as possible. Most centres did this within the submission window.

It is important that the camera is located so that it captures all of the area in which candidates are performing, while avoiding also filming the head and shoulders of the examiner. Almost all centres were able to use a performance space that was quiet and without interruption.

Malpractice is rare in this examination, but one area candidates and centres need to be aware of in the concept pro-forma. As it is dealing with a group activity, it is possible candidates will have worked together on research and quite properly, on their directorial intentions. They must remember, however, to make sure their responses to the questions on the pro-forma are their own work and not a composite of what their group has done where everyone writes in a similar or same way.

Concept Pro-forma

What candidates did well

Some very high-level analysis of their own dramatic intentions was seen, applying dramatic knowledge and understanding of techniques and practitioners and clear in-depth understanding of their texts studied for performance.

There was always a good sense of understanding the characters and plot of the performance text that had been studied. This was generally combined with the ability to set it in its social, cultural and historical context.

Almost all candidates wrote convincingly about their approach to the role that they were playing and even where they struggled to relate this to the challenges of the play as a whole, they nevertheless understood the key elements that they were attempting to communicate to their audience.

Candidates generally answered Questions 2 and 3 particularly well. There were some very good examples of answers that looked at the intended artistic vision set out by the performers. This was enhanced by a detailed understanding of the character's importance in the role they were playing. Other strong examples came from answers that addressed the context of the playwright and the genre and style of the play. Other examples of good practice included commenting on previous productions that were then compared/contrasted to their own interpretation. This was considered in light of the modern-day audience perspective and aligned with the depth required for Question 1.

What candidates did not do well

Some examiners reported that many candidates ignored the instruction to discuss the challenges of the performance text and wrote about one of two things: either the challenges of the content of the play, or the challenges of the specific role they were allocated to perform.

Weaker candidates struggled to understand the socio-economic significance of the text they had studied, and many general stereotypes were offered about plays from the 1980s. These tended to lump together indiscriminately people who were, for example, poor, unemployed, from the North, 'affected by Thatcher', or had missed out on education. This was often combined with sweeping generalisations about the intentions of the playwright in portraying these issues.

Not clearly addressing the question headings. Under 'demands' some examiners reported lengthy accounts of playwright's intentions that made the actual demands of the work either forgotten completely or a brief mention at the end. Balance, where the heading is asking more than one thing; vision often included demands that were not considered under the previous heading. Development of role was sometimes more a literary analysis than a dramatic exploration of what they were seeking to assimilate as a performer and express on stage.

There needed to be more focus on the whole text rather than the scene which was being performed. Answers for Question 3 sometimes focused on the rehearsal process rather than the specifics of the character nuances. Aspects such as hot seating were addressed as ways in which the candidates prepared for performance. While there was some contextual understanding, this could have been enhanced with further depth and looking into previous productions of the play. Often there was repetition with points being made across the three questions.

One examiner reported that there was rather too much about what the playwright felt about issues, rather than how it is manifested in the text/action and how it can then be realised in a dramatic context.

A common theme from examiners was that there was insufficient understanding of dramatic structure, both in the overall text and across the extract, and insufficient use of relevant vocabulary. There is a glossary in the specification, little of which appears in the discussions.

Advice to centres about the concept pro-forma

- consider breaking down the questions so that the detail in the answers can be addressed in line with the required responses
- deconstruct the headings and analyse them as they relate to the work undertaken, create a set of bullet points to cover which address those headings, before writing the analysis, organise them into a structured sequence, and use those bullets as the structure for the writing
- the most successful submissions were often not the most expansive
- referring to practitioners as 'Stan' and 'Bert' at A level is inappropriate
- taking a recipe approach to practitioners, referring to practitioners as "We added a bit of Brecht with a bit of Berkoff, then we used Stanislavski...". A more successful response would be to refer to the techniques they used in rehearsal and which specific practitioners they found useful and why.

The advice given in previous reports is still relevant. Responses to Question 1 should focus on:

- the demands of the whole play – the style, the setting, the characters, the action, the use of language, the period, etc.
- how this has been performed in the past and how others may have performed it for a present day audience (this latter aspect was often completely ignored)
- examples should quote understanding based on practical work on the whole text.

This could include the work done in studying the whole text before selecting the extracts.

In other words, what does the candidate know and understand about performing the play that has been selected, researched studied and practised?

Responses to this first question should neither refer to nor need mention, unless specifically relevant, the role played by the candidate, the extract(s)/sections chosen, nor the way they are to be performed in the examination.

Responses to Question 2 should focus on:

- having acquired that knowledge and understanding of the whole play through study, research and practice, in what ways does the candidate intend to project the intentions of the whole play to the audience through the extract(s)/sections being presented?
- how does the candidate's performance encapsulate, take into account, demonstrate, conclude, prefigure, explain, expose the whole play? This could be through character(s) and interactions, action, tension, dialogue, setting, costume, etc.

For example, in playing the opening scene in Shakespeare's King Lear, the three daughters their father and assorted husbands, courtiers and attendants, must give the audience a notion of the characters that are to unfold to us later in the play.

Responses to Question 3 should focus on:

- the role the candidate is to play in the selected extract{s}.

Moments, lines of dialogue, actions should be used to explain those "most important characteristics".

This is not a blow-by-blow narration of what the cast as a whole do or say in the extract nor is it an analysis of all the characters in the piece.

Unless the comment relates specifically to the role played, there need not be any mention of characters other than the one played by the candidate.

There should be reference made to the ways in which the candidate has approached these characteristics practically in rehearsal and perhaps comment on intention behind the choices they have made, for example, in movement, speech, positioning, costume, etc.

Texts

This year with covid amendments provided several challenges. Most centres decided to stick to the original specification and performed good-length extracts. Some decided to take the amendments option and use monologues. One challenge with both options is ensuring candidates are offered sufficient challenge by the text selected. Centres should make sure that in group work all candidates have reasonably equal exposure in order to demonstrate their skills. It is recognised that this can be difficult with a large group, but judicious editing can often give some balance to the role opportunities. Inevitably candidates will suffer if they have not had sufficient exposure to demonstrate a range of skills.

Some centres struggled in providing monologues that gave a sufficient range of skills to be demonstrated consistently, some only just meeting the covid amendment minimum. Some examiners suggested that a few monologues appeared almost as audition pieces rather than an exam demonstrating the skills learnt over the previous two years of following the course. Fortunately, this challenge will not exist in the next series as we return to live examined performances without covid amendments and without monologues and duologues.

Performances

Examiners enjoyed a wide range of performance by candidates who clearly understood theatrical demands and how they could manipulate the drama experience with an audience. One examiner reported that there was a huge range of texts chosen, experiencing 37 texts across just seven centres. There also seemed to be a move away from what had become almost stock texts, with more adventurous and potentially imaginative texts being chosen along with more examples of classic texts developed and performed imaginatively.

What did candidates do best?

When the candidates were aware that they were creating the presence of an 'other', for an audience to experience.

Centres showed they were able to do closely choreographed highly stylised ensemble pieces sometimes extremely well.

Performance memory was excellent with few slips or prompts.

There were some very polished monologues where the candidate had recognised the restrictions and gone to great lengths to make sure the acting space was used, props and furniture as appropriate was used, costume and make-up was included, and where there was a good range of technique of voice, physicality and paralanguage demonstrated.

What did candidates find a challenge?

Some candidates allowed their dialogue to be too conversational or too rushed as though they were trying to get through their lines rather than allowing thinking and reaction time for the characters. Other candidates did not think about their physicality. There was too much sitting down and crossing of legs in a comfortable position while delivering far less comfortable lines

Act adult characters naturalistically. Some candidates didn't seem able to have assimilated characters very well that were above their age level. In one example, the examiner reported that the character research seemed somewhat superficial; the full depth of what was really bothering those characters needed to have been explored more thoroughly to be performed well - they came across as soap opera characters.

What is the whole character? – feelings are only important if they can be communicated to the audience, otherwise no matter how much the actor 'feels' it is still only internalised without an outward expression.

Some performances seemed self-centred and inward-looking, self-indulgent even suggested one examiner. A small number of candidates didn't seem to care about reaching their audience, playing at them rather than to them. In ordinary times audience relationship at A level has always been part of the effectiveness of the piece. In this example they didn't much seem to care, even where there was an audience. For the extreme pieces, there seemed to be an intention to make the audience endure the performance. Artaud has its place but for examination it's more limited as performance than a lot of centres realise.

Some candidates had difficulty in maintaining their role, especially when an individual did not have a speaking part for a while.

Advice to centres about performances

Candidates should carry out in-depth analysis of character motivations, beyond simply their relationship with others in front of them, to explore what their relationship is with themselves and how that then impacts on how they deal with others.

Groups should check their blocking, physical presence, and projection. They should also consider the pacing of their performance, especially for longer extracts.

Use costume and other aspects of design to enhance the performance experience.

Design

There are still only small numbers taking the Design option. As stressed in previous reports, it is essential that the level of demand of the design reflects the level of exam and is equivalent to the demand placed on the actors.

The specification lists what is required clearly. The best examples of design work were supported not only by relevant comments in the concept pro-forma, but also by working to scale models (set design), detailed costume and make-up research ideas leading from conception to production, and good filming of the end product with an oral presentation covering issue raised during the development of ideas and working with the performers.

One examiner reported that 'Two LX designers realised designs that were sufficiently complex, with a wide range of different lanterns in use; with a variety of moods and atmospheres created and several cues operated. Rig plans and cue/effects lists were also produced. Also, both candidates were filmed operating the relevant LX/SFX desks in performance.'

An understanding and use of technical elements and vocabulary are essential if higher marks are to be achieved.

Most common causes of centres not passing

Under-rehearsal; an acting role with insufficient demand; a design role with insufficient information on preparation, design development or design detail. Concept pro-forma not addressing the questions.

Avoiding potential malpractice

Concept pro-forma must be produced individually. When writing concept pro-formas, although there may have been group decisions and group research, the writing of the concept pro-forma is an individual activity and must not contain common sections or paragraphs. Quotes must be attributed.

Helpful resources

Previous examiner reports.

The specification with its list of Drama vocabulary.

Additional comments

Several examiners commented on their concerns regarding an increased use of texts that are focused on suicide. In an era where teenage suicide has increased dramatically, perhaps OCR should consider whether such texts should be approved for use.

Several examiners also commented on an increase of texts that were performed with the use of many expletives leading to drab and insubstantial performances.

Perhaps because video was used for examination, there was a significant increase in the use of background music and underscoring, similar to what would be expected when watching a film. If this trend continues it might be something that we have to provide guidance for.

Texts used

The list that follows provides a few examples of the texts used by centres. Providing this list is in no way recommending any of these plays, but rather is an indication of the breadth of selection.

<i>Name of text</i>	<i>Playwright</i>
The Thirty Nine Steps	Patrick Barlow
Wind in the Willows	Alan Bennett
Greek	Steven Berkoff
Agamemnon	Steven Berkoff
Metamorphosis	Steven Berkoff
London Road	Alecky Blythe
Things I know to be true	Bovell
The Good Person of Setzuan	Bertolt Brecht
The Caucasian Chalk Circle	Bertolt Brecht
Reasons to be Pretty	Neil Bute
Jerusalem	Jez Butterworth
Fen	Caryl Churchill
Love and Information	Caryl Churchill
Top Girls	Caryl Churchill
Jane Eyre	Adapted by Sally Cookson
Hay Fever	Noel Coward
Attempts on her Life	Martin Crimp
Playhouse creatures	De Angelis
Positive hour	De Angelis
Medea	Euripides
The Trojan Women	Euripides
Can't Pay, Won't Pay	Dario Fo
Everyman	Kerry Frampton (adapted)
Love song	Frantic and Abi Morgan
The Maids	Jean Genet
Bouncers	John Godber
Shakers	John Godber
Animal Farm by George Orwell,	adapted by Peter Hall
A Doll's House	Henrik Ibsen
Girls	Theresa Ikoko
The Bald Primadonna	Eugene Ionesco
Rhinoceros	Eugene Ionesco
My Mother Said I Never Should	Charlotte Keatley

Name of text	Playwright
Metaverse	Hannah Khalil
Tristan and Yseult	Kneehigh
Angels in America	Tony Kushner
Roberto Zucco	Bernard Marie Koltes
Frozen	Lavery
Yerma and Blood Wedding	Lorca
A View from the Bridge	Arthur Miller
The Play That Goes Wrong	Mischief Theatre
Fugee	Abi Morgan
Night, Mother	Marsha Norman
Tissue	Louise Page
<i>Four little girls</i>	Picasso
The effect	Prebble
An Inspector Calls	J B Priestley
Tender Napalm	Philip Ridley
As You Like It	Shakespeare
King Lear	Shakespeare
Black Comedy	Peter Schaffer
The Good Doctor	Neil Simon
The Odd Couple	Neil Simon
Pornography	Simon Stephens
The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time	Haddon/Stephens
Bronte	Polly Teale
Education, Education, Education	The Wardrobe Ensemble
Bazaar and Rumage	Townsend
Marat Sade	Peter Weiss
Ladies Down Under	Amanda Whittington
The Importance of Being Earnest	Oscar Wilde
Assassins	Weidman/Sondheim
Lord of the Flies	Williams/Golding

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