

Examiners' report

A LEVEL

DRAMA AND THEATRE

**OCR Level 3 Advanced GCE
in Drama and Theatre**

H459

For first teaching in 2016

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Contents

Introduction	3
General overview	4
Administration	4
Concept proforma	5
Advice to centres about the concept proforma	8
Texts.....	9
Performance	10
Advice to centres about performances	13
Design	14
Guidance	15
Health and safety	15
Costume	15
Set design.....	16
Lighting (LX)	17
Sound (SFX).....	18
Most common causes of centres not passing.....	18
Avoiding potential malpractice.....	19
Additional comments.....	20

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.

Where overall performance on a question/question part was considered good, with no particular areas to highlight, these questions have not been included in the report.

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General overview

Overall, the examination ran very smoothly. Examiners reported seeing some very exciting and engaging performances, some challenging, and an increase and successful approach to more traditional texts. There was also evidence of some centres using more contemporary texts that had been published and performed professionally just a couple of years ago. There was evidence that previous reports had been helpful and acted upon, leading to some improvements.

Administration

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

The time-sensitive paperwork required is important and although most centres met the deadline of seven days for sending the examiner the required documentation, a small number missed deadlines and the concept proforma and running order and associated documentation was received very late.

The seven-day deadline for documentation and concept proforma is in place to make sure parity for candidates and to give examiners sufficient time to mark the concept proforma 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. This time also allows examiners to make sure they are familiar with the text to be performed and the location of the extract within it. In addition, non-receipt by the seven-day deadline puts candidates at risk of receiving a zero for that element of the examination.

As a reminder, the items required are as follows.

- The concept proforma for each candidate as a hard copy. Electronic versions are not acceptable. The proforma must be signed by the candidate and centre confirming that the work is that of the individual candidate alone. It is also important for the candidate's name and number to appear on each answer page in case they become detached from the front page.
- 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 school photos of the candidates when they were younger. Photos can be provided on the day and do not need to be sent in advance.
- Information about the text to be performed as this helps the examiner check they are familiar with the text and playwright before marking the concept proforma and watching the performance. It is not necessary to send copies of the text to the examiner.
- Directions to the centre, and how to access it if the examination is after normal hours. Two years ago at a twilight performance the examiner waited outside locked gates for some time and managed to gain access only when a teacher was leaving and opened the gate.

Once the date has been fixed the examiner will send a checklist to the centre with all the requirements listed.

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. This must always be approved by OCR in advance, and evidence of this approval should be given to the examiner before the performance taking place. Centres with very small cohorts that fall below three candidates must receive authorisation from OCR, and the number must be made up so that there is a minimum of three performers. It is permissible for stand-in people to use a text.

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.

The specification states that it is a requirement the centre provides an audience for performances. The specification gives details of the nature of audiences permitted. When an entry requires more than one performance group, the audience may be made up of the actual examination class, taking it in turns to perform and to watch their peers, which is acceptable. Other centres also had classes watching from younger years or possibly potential GCE students. Many centres chose an after-hours performance and had invited candidates' parents and friends to watch. Without exception, examiners reported how an audience helps candidates respond positively and enhance the atmosphere. Audiences must be informed that the performance is an A Level examination.

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. At the time of writing 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. Moderated work is submitted using the Submit for Assessment system, but this has not been set up for this examination and centres should use the current system if and until notified differently by OCR.

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

Concept proforma

What did candidates do 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, explaining the original intentions of the playwright, and when the play was written.

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. Even where they struggled to relate this to the challenges of the play, they nevertheless understood the key elements that they were attempting to communicate to their audience.

Examiners reported that candidates generally:

- discussed the details of how they intended to play their roles
- explained the themes of the play
- understood and articulated the intention of the playwright
- made links to practitioners they had explored and how they had influenced their work
- referenced live theatre they had seen to inspire their own vision.

Many examiners reported an improvement this year, with candidates keeping to a more disciplined approach to the three questions, which gave the work an overall coherence. Such candidates:

- understood the playwright's intentions and analysed the demands of the whole text
- gave very specific acting choices with thorough practical detail/explication which was then present in the performance on the day
- considered theatre-making as a whole in Question 2 and outlined decisions relating to music, costume and other design elements
- made reference to the whole text in Question 2 rather than only the excerpt they were performing
- provided reference to practitioners or live theatre-making which was linked to how their own ideas had evolved
- showed commitment to the piece from a performance/theatre-making point of view.

Candidates generally answered Questions 2 and 3 particularly well. There were some very good examples of responses 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 successful responses were ones 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 explored considering the modern-day audience perspective and aligned with the depth required for Question 1.

One examiner commented: *'The most successful candidates wrote fluently and confidently, seamlessly merging analysis of text and character with examples of practical acting techniques. These candidates showed thorough knowledge of their chosen texts and were able to use technical theatre vocabulary appropriately. These candidates clearly had taken ownership of their performance pieces and were keen to explain what an audience could expect from their performance.'*

Another examiner reported on a specific performance: *'A performance of "John Proctor is the Villain" was a fantastic example of how to capture the "world of the play" and convey the passion and agony of the characters' experiences. The candidates mastered the American accents extraordinarily well. This was a polished performance where each candidate's characterisation was superbly crafted. The pace and dynamics of the extract combined with their performance skills resulted in an emotional and moving climax handled skilfully.'*

What did candidates find challenging?

Some examiners reported that many candidates ignored the instruction to identify and discuss the dramatic demands 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. In a couple of instances, candidates focused on the size of the part and the challenge of learning lines, something that may have been true, but is not an appropriate response to the question.

Less successful responses did not discuss 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', had missed out on education, or were treated badly because they were women. This was often combined with sweeping generalisations about the intentions of the playwright in portraying these issues.

The knowledge and understanding of technical elements of the drama, the referencing of practitioners, theatrical style, and performance techniques were all often somewhat limited. Artistic vision was

sometimes more focused on issues of stage practicalities which should have been considered under 'demands'.

The role to be played and the characteristics of the extract tended to be used as a general 'what I want to say about our piece', rather than have a focus to a question's elements.

The less successful responses did not identify the specific demands of the text and hence to explain how these would be tackled in their own performance piece. There was often more of a 'running commentary' of the plot or a lengthy character description. These candidates also tended to include much less detail and analysis and were much less confident at using subject-specific vocabulary to describe their staging decisions. They were also less clear on the use of dramatic devices and the influence of practitioners in their work. In one or two cases, the lack of any punctuation combined with typing errors, such as repeated paragraphs, made it difficult to make sense of the writing. These candidates would have benefited from proof-reading their work to identify these issues.

There were a few examples where candidates did not respond fully to one of the questions and provided one brief paragraph if they did attempt the question. As the concept proforma is marked holistically, this places a candidate at a severe disadvantage.

Some candidates relied on lengthy text analysis and plot narrative rather than practical theatre-making. There were several examples of high-achieving candidates going well beyond what each section asked for and, as a consequence, they lost overall coherence.

There were also candidates who did not clearly address 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. There needs to be 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 just the extract to be 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. Discussion of the rehearsal process is very important if properly focused.

While it is important to explore what the playwright felt about issues that underpinned the writing of the text, there was sometimes too much detail given rather than an explanation about 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 with lower marked responses 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 appeared in the discussions.

Last year one examiner made a comment that is worth repeating: *'Some answers were very thin and lacked depth and academic rigour. Some candidates couldn't give examples of previous productions of the play which had informed their artistic decisions. The final question on the concept proforma was sometimes answered as a commentary of what was going to happen as opposed to identification of specific moments or some identification of shaping, climax, etc. and what to look out for.'*

It would be good to see more technical language used at this level to describe structure; dramatic ideas and production elements.'

Another examiner from this series said: *'The less successful responses struggled to focus their discussion to the questions. They found it difficult to specifically identify the demands of the text or found themselves writing a detailed character description or commentary on the plot, rather than specifying their own artistic decisions and highlighting key moments for the examiner to identify. There were some candidates whose use of punctuation made it quite difficult for the reader to understand the meaning, which was a shame. Lower performing submissions also tended to include less detail and were less able to use technical language to describe their design and production decisions.'*

Advice to centres about the concept proforma

Candidates should avoid resorting to given formulae, or following a company orthodoxy, in place of research into the whole play, the characters and thorough rehearsal. Understanding the processes involved in characterisation would give greater depth to responses.

The advice given in previous reports is still relevant:

- Consider breaking down the questions so that the detail in the responses 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 that 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.
- Avoid 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...'. Better that candidates refer to the techniques they used in rehearsal and which specific practitioners they found useful and why.
- Make sure they have a thorough understanding of the playwright's original intention and the style of the original production; watch examples of different interpretations to gain some idea of what could work and why.
- Make sure candidates have the subject-specific knowledge and vocabulary to allow them to confidently explain their artistic decisions effectively, guiding the examiner to look for specific moments within the production or specific elements of characterisation.
- Focus more closely on the context of the play or plays being studied and align this with the original intentions of the playwright. This can then be compared to modern interpretations more closely, allowing for a better understanding of the desired impact.

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, consider, 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 and 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

It is important to make sure candidates are offered sufficient challenge by the text selected. Centres should make sure that in group work all candidates have reasonably equal exposure 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. Examiners cannot give marks for what they do not see.

There was an interesting range of repertoire that was carefully chosen to be engaging and challenging, but also appropriate to a school-based audience in the context of a public examination. There was a good range of lesser-known plays that produced extremely powerful performances. These included:

Til the Stars Come Down – Beth Steel

Machinal – Sophie Treadwell

Radiant Vermin – Philip Ridley

Di and Viv and Rose – Amelia Bullmore

The Revlon Girl – Neil Anthony Docking

There were instances of extremely successful performances where the overall performance intention shone through in the choice of design elements, especially set and lighting, as well as in the quality of the acting.

The texts chosen must have been approved after submission to the Drama Text Management Service. Centres cannot use texts in this unit that have been set for another unit within the specification.

Section 5g.: Guidance on centre-chosen performance texts: Practitioners in practice (Components 11/12 or 13/14) and Exploring and performing texts (Components 21 or 22) on page 63 of the [specification](#) gives clear guidance regarding the suitability of content. Care should be taken that centres do not confuse this with the guidance for texts to be studied, as what is allowed is different to what can be performed.

*Candidates' performances **may not** contain:*

- *strong violence acted out against another character which dwells on the infliction of pain or injury*
- *sadistic violence*
- *frequent use of very strong language*
- *detailed or extended portrayals of sexual activity*
- *scenes of sexual violence*
- *nudity*
- *scenes explicitly demonstrating drug taking.*

It is the responsibility of the centre to check these criteria against the text chosen, as the Text Management Service does not check a text regarding the suitability listed above but ensures it does not clash with texts being used in another part of the examination, or that has been considered inappropriate. There was a small number of plays being chosen that did not meet these requirements, especially regarding '*frequent use of very strong language*', and '*sadistic violence*'. While this did not affect the awarding of marks on this occasion, centres should make sure they meet the requirements.

Occasionally centres edited texts to fit the number of candidates and for other appropriate reasons, very successfully. When this happens, it is important to make sure the integrity of the original remains. Centres and candidates are not allowed to add material written by themselves or by anyone else. Centres must make sure they have checked they have permission from the copyright owners to perform the text.

Performance

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. Several examiners reported that there was a wide range of texts chosen. The trend of previous years continued with 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. There was an increase in the use of comedic texts.

What did candidates do well?

Successful candidates maximised their presence and clearly enjoyed the opportunity to perform, with a genuine commitment, including in quite serious pieces.

They tended to have good sense of pace and pause, articulation, clarity, expression and control of the dialogue – making the audience listen.

If physicality was used, it was controlled and specific to requirements rather than appearing bolted on.

The right text had been selected to suit the interest of the candidates with adequate exposure for all. It is advisable to avoid texts where the candidate acts a role that reflects their own experience, age and situation, and also avoids teenage angst.

- Centres showed they were able to do closely choreographed highly stylised ensemble pieces sometimes extremely well.
- Some candidates used their researched knowledge and understanding of the play to inform skill and technique choices; also, those who re-imagined or re-interpreted texts still had a very clear idea of the original style to build on.
- There were some highly stylised interpretations that attempted to capture the essence of the time/era in the costume, lighting, set and props. These elements of performance had clearly been fully rehearsed, and this aided the confidence on stage in handling the use of props and coping with any costume issues. There were some standout performances which had believability and energy throughout with some risk-taking and insightful use of physical theatre.
- Evidence of clarity of dialogue, action/movement, slick transitions and having thought about the reduction of unnecessary clutter.
- Performance memory was excellent with few slips or prompts.
- Performances where there was a good range of technique of voice, physicality and paralanguage demonstrated.
- Several texts required accents, and these were attempted successfully and confidently.
- There were some outstanding characterisations which were engaging and moving.
- There was frequently a strong sense of an ensemble working seamlessly together.
- Candidates made good use of their resources – even when limited.

One examiner said: *'There were several performances that were shaped and rehearsed with the meaning of the text clearly shared by the ensemble. Where there were design candidates, they were generally very well integrated into the vision and had created designs in open dialogue with the performers.'*

The ability to communicate meaning was directly related to the work in the concept proforma and it was frequently the case that candidates who expressed a clear artistic intention in their written work went on to communicate it to their audience. There were hardly any performances without an audience and most groups had therefore given careful consideration to staging, pacing, lighting and focus. Even when there were lapses of performance skills of one or more group members, the strength of the group dynamic was generally enough to carry the action through an awkward moment.

The tightness of the ensemble was one of the distinguishing marks of successful performances. It was good to see an increasing number of groups attempting more comedic plays and rising to the challenge of timing, pacing and clear articulation. Irrespective of the style of the play studied, however, there were many excellent, generous performances in which each member of the ensemble was supportive of the other members.'

What did candidates find challenging?

Mid-band performances were most often variable in the balance of performance skills on display. Performances were often impressionistic rather than skilled and, while roles were often believable and made a full contribution to the group effort, it was generally to point to a particular technical limitation, such as clarity of delivery, or slightly inconsistent physicality. On occasion, the entire ensemble could lose confidence through a slip of one member but most often this was displayed itself in variable pacing rather than anything that would undermine the performance.

There were relatively few ineffective performances. The nature of the plays selected offered few opportunities for 'passengers' and it was immediately obvious when an ensemble member had been given a role that required less exposure than the others. That said, the challenges of diction, articulation, projection and pacing were real challenges for some group members, and there were rare instances where the overall pace and direction of the piece was affected by the limitations of any less successful performances. There were occasional examples where the combination of the play selected, together with the technical limitations of some group members, led to an unnecessarily subdued, confessional approach to the performance.

Less successful candidates showed a general lack of awareness of the need to create a presence on the performance area.

Although most candidates spoke clearly and with good projection, a feature of their lack of success was lack of volume, poor clarity of diction, variable accents, and expecting the audience to strain to listen to conversational-level dialogue. They tended to be less successful at using the space sufficiently to enhance reaction and relationship with the audience.

A few candidates demonstrated an obvious uncomfortable awkwardness, as if this was their first time in front of an audience.

Points made last year are worth repeating:

- Some performers could be static in their interpretations with a lack of confidence in the use of set, costume and props. Where performances needed development, this was with characters that were often underplayed – the naturalism would have suited film drama rather than a theatrical performance and some of this naturalism didn't communicate as well as it could have done in stage drama.
- Allowing 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 recourse to sitting down and crossing of legs in a comfortable position while delivering far less comfortable lines or being stuck behind a desk or other piece of furniture.
- Some candidates applied the physical techniques of a third party in a formulaic way to their work. This led to very average replications of *Frantic Assembly* (mostly, for example) and a lack of original ideas.
- 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. A small number of candidates didn't successfully reach their audience, playing at them rather than to them. One examiner said: *'... 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 socially disturbing and violent pieces, it was almost as if there was an intention to make the audience endure the performance. Artaud's theatre has its place but for examination it is more limiting and challenging in performance than a lot of candidates realise.

- Some candidates had difficulty in maintaining their role, especially when an individual did not have a speaking part for a while.
- Less successful candidates fell into clichéd and unconvincing characterisations. Their performances lacked depth and meaning. These tended to be performers who didn't demonstrate a real understanding of what was required by their specific scene or play.
- Performers occasionally lacked vocal clarity and dynamic variation.

Advice to centres about performances

The better results tended to come from centres where the selection of play texts had been thoughtfully considered in relation to the specific skills and requirements of the candidates. When the candidates had a real connection and passion for their text, this came across in their absorption with their performance.

Some candidates tended to struggle with busy, over-cluttered set and prop design. Others handled props confidently and had integrated their use entirely. It was apparent that candidates who had rehearsed more intensively were naturally able to present their extract with more skill. Centres need to support their candidates to thoroughly rehearse their work and make sure it is 'performance ready' in advance of the exam day.

Some candidates would benefit from specific focus on the use of voice.

Shouting lines doesn't always produce a dramatic moment, no matter how sudden. Most playwrights are economic in their writing, so every word matters. If the line is thrown away by excessive shouting, then the meaning has gone too.

Focus on the confidence in the performers by fully rehearsing elements such as the use of costume and props. There is also room to encourage bolder choices to be made in terms of characterisation and physicality as there was a tendency to underplay elements and rely on extreme naturalism in the interpretations.

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 spend more time thinking about, planning and executing their blocking, physical presence and projection.

Pacing of the performance is very important. Some texts need fast picking-up of cues and momentum, and without it the performance will appear bland.

Make sure candidates really understand their play/scene/character and what that character is trying to say to the audience.

Spend some time on vocal work specifically during the A Level course, to provide candidates with the knowledge to put this to good use as they work on their own exam pieces.

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

Less confident candidates were sometimes so focused on delivering lines, they missed easy opportunities to develop much more precisely focused physicality.

Wandering feet and wavy hands detract from vocal delivery. Candidates need to have awareness of the space in which they are working and how to use it.

One examiner said: '*... vocal delivery is still an area to develop, volume is not the only vocal skill, more use of varied pace and pause, understanding the need for "thinking time" for the character(s) and the audience.*'

Make sure candidates:

- understand the journey of the character and bring out the light and shade of this with their performance skills
- understand what they are saying
- start strongly and confidently – some candidates got better as they 'warmed up' throughout the piece.

Centres should select texts that suit the strengths of the students – centres that choose texts because they would be artistically challenging without any thought to the skills of their candidates do them a disservice.

Design

As highlighted in previous reports, it is essential that the level of demand of the design reflects the level of examination and is equivalent to the demand placed on the actors. This series saw some of the best design work experienced by examiners.

One examiner reported: '*These (design submissions) were almost without exception well delivered. In particular, the point made earlier about the strong link with the concept proforma is reiterated since the responsibility for creating the overall atmosphere and ethos of the performance lay in the various designs.*'

Examiners reported experience of some excellent costume design and making this year. There were period costumes re-worked from charity shop finds, costumes made from scratch, care for detail, and finding full cast costumes, so that the featured exam pieces don't stand out as something separate to the rest of the piece.

There were many knowledgeable and purposeful lighting and sound examples. One examiner compared an example of outstanding lighting and sound for *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* to a professional production (albeit with strong in-house facilities) and the sound, created by the sound designer in some instances by using an app to layer sounds rather than simply sourcing pre-existing tracks/sounds, added its own humour to the piece.

The specification lists clearly what is required for design candidates. The most successful examples of design work were supported not only by relevant comments in the concept proforma, 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 outcome. Almost all candidates took up the opportunity to give an oral presentation covering their research, issues raised during the development of ideas, practical challenges and working with the performers. Some walked the examiner around their set, others took them into the lighting/sound box, or to their controls to demonstrate some of the lighting or sound states; others had actors modelling their costumes to demonstrate their effectiveness in performance. While there are no marks for a presentation, whatever the format, they all helped the examiner understand what they were assessing. It follows that while not a required element, it is something recommended as good practice.

An understanding and use of technical elements and vocabulary are essential if higher marks are to be achieved. Reference to design practitioners appropriate to the design chosen can also be supportive.

Guidance

The benchmark is that there must be parity in demand between candidates selecting design and those selecting acting as their performance skill.

The concept proforma can be very helpful by providing evidence of the thought processes of the candidate. Other supporting evidence – as described below – is essential if candidates are to access the higher mark bands. The concept proforma should signpost and provide details of the decision-making process in preparation for designs the examiner will see.

Hardly any candidates now fall into the category of doing design because their attendance is lacking, or they have difficulty working in a group. Even candidates in centres with limited resources have been able to present effective designs with extensive back-up research and material.

Health and safety

This is an important and essential element for consideration in design work. Whether it is the use of scissors and sewing machines, potential trips and falls in costume design, the danger of heights with rigging or electrocution and overheating with lighting, the level of decibels in sound or the safe use of tools and weight of materials in manufacturing and the security of sets – all areas of design have their own health and safety challenges and should be considered. It might not be stated explicitly in the specification but is an important element of learning in the different design options.

Health and safety key areas

- CDM Regs (Construction Design and Management Regulations 2015 apply to all construction projects, including those for the entertainment industry)
- risk assessments
- method statements
- manual handling
- working at height
- electrical safety
- safe use of access equipment
- slips, trips and falls.

Costume

It is important that candidates provide evidence that they have, themselves, had the ideas and have knowledge and understanding of how to make them work.

Evidence may include:

- a presentation to explain their ideas (but the examiner will not ask questions)
- design board of ideas
- photographs
- diagrams
- research
- swatches of fabric
- development/progression leading to final design including reasons for choices.

The presentation should provide a clear explanation of the physical evidence or artefacts; this will clarify what is seen, which may not otherwise always be made clear. How the explanation is presented will not be marked.

There should be evidence of understanding of genre, the period in which the play is set, and the social/historical context. Has the candidate considered alternative means of meeting the design? Successful candidates will cover this in their concept proforma as well as in the physical evidence presented.

The realisation should match with the ideas presented – changes are acceptable and part of the artistic process but should be explained. The best results show progression and development of ideas from first ideas to the final design

It is not necessary for candidates to make the costume; how the costume was sourced does not affect marking, but the relevance and the manner of, and reasons for, outsourcing are important.

Costume can be adapted from charity shop stock, but how and why this is done needs explaining.

There may be some repetition of points made in the concept proforma which is acceptable if it serves to enhance the original explanation and illustrates original ideas.

The final design should illustrate character, personality, mood, relevance to text and its context.

It should be appropriate for the character in the performance at the specific point in the script/the situation at the time.

It is essential that designs consider the practicalities for the actor wearing it – ease of movement, comfort, and that it will not fall apart. Masks will need particular attention.

Set design

A presentation may be useful, walking the examiner around the set, demonstrating scenes and their changes using the box set model to help:

- Understand the space available (studio, pros arch stage, in-the-round, etc.).
- Where the audience is to be located.
- Dimensions available (leads to scale drawing of ground plan) including height, for access.
- Equipment available, boxes, furniture, flats, drapes, etc.
- Ground plan, to scale, indicating entrances and exits, furniture, flats, etc.
- Number of scenes required. Are there changes of scene? Who? How?
- Challenges of interior and/or exterior locations. What does the script ask for in terms of setting?
- Remember the practicalities of moving scenery, placing trucks, using a fly tower (if available). How heavy is scenery and furniture for scene changing and who is going to do the changes? Will this cause a delay on the stage action?
- How many actors are on stage and what are their requirements for furniture and props?
- Set box with video 'tour' around it – that could have a voice-over rationale. Explanation of what they are trying to represent; is it naturalistic, symbolic or something else? What has been the work needed to create the set? What has been made, painted, found or outsourced?

A set model is a requirement, although this can be in digital format if a centre has CAD facilities.

One examiner reported: *'In one centre, they had built a robust scale model of their studio space in 18mm plywood, with doorway cut-outs, painted it black and each candidate used it to present/video their set. They all knew what scale they were working to and, as one commented about using the same box, "it's only the same as when we have to change the sets on stage".'*

Centres and candidates may find the following materials useful in the approach to and preparation of set designs:

[Step-by-Step Guide to Set Design - Dramatics Magazine](#)

[Set Design 101 - Specialty Theatre](#)

Lighting (LX)

A strong level of design, technical and practical knowledge and skill is required to translate and realise any artistic, creative vision.

Candidates should know what they've got to use and know how to use it to get what they want.

- Consider what form the performance will be – dance, text-based theatre piece, physical theatre piece, monologue or musical? Would they approach these differently and, if so, why?
- If necessary, discuss the differences between realistic and non-realistic lighting design.
- Consider which they have chosen for this design. Can they talk you through their process and decisions surrounding that choice and how it will enhance the performance/story telling?
- Provide a simple schematic, a rig plan of how the lighting console connects to the lights.
- Understand the available equipment. How many channels are available? Are there possible limitations on power available? The system at the school may be fairly basic – console, dimmers, tungsten source, generic lighting fixtures. Some schools may have more advanced facilities that require a good level of knowledge in system networks in order to control the lighting console, nodes and intelligent fixtures. Clear knowledge and understanding of how the system works is the important part here, not the complexity of the system.
- Consider types of lanterns available/to be used – profile, flood-Fresnel, moving heads, Par cans and LED varieties.
- Consider if they can discuss the differences between these fixture types. Can they explain the types of fixtures they are using within their design and why they have chosen them?
- Include a rig plan indicating basic cover and specials.
- Consider what the script asks for in terms of lighting.
- Consider how many lighting states. Are they interior or exterior? Realistic, non-realistic, any stylised concepts or effects used to enhance the story telling?
- Consider the process of building the lighting states in discussion with the director and creative team (or other candidates within the group).
- Create an annotated script with cues.
- Have a cue sheet for operation, including levels, timing, fades. This is perfect for older systems with preset manual faders. However, modern consoles store all this information. Text can be added within the cue stack on the console to note a cue point, scene or section within a piece to help the operator navigate the cue list. Lighting designers would still create their own cue list and the text on the console would match their list. Except for the script and rig plan, most professional LDs are paperless at the production desk.
- Consider special effects – e.g. gobo (**g**oes-**b**efore-**o**ptics), LED tape, practical lamps, smoke/haze, pyro, etc. How are they made? What is used? What is the desired effect?

Useful resources



[McCandless Stage Lighting Method | Illuminated Integration](#)

Richard Pilbrow, who could be considered the British equivalent of McCandless, is the author of several prominent books:

[Stage Lighting Design: The Art, The Craft, The Life](#)

[A Theatre Project](#)

[A Sense of Theatre – The untold story of Britain's National Theatre](#)

Sound (SFX)

Candidates need to:

- understand the sound reproduction equipment available
- remember that sound can be collected and edited on a mobile phone
- have a rig plan of the speakers – where are they located in relation to the performance space, and can they be moved to locate a sound coming from a specific place/direction?
- know what the script asks for in terms of sound
- understand the process of introducing sounds in discussion with actors
- have sourced sounds, i.e. online, CD/vinyl, live recording, etc.
- have an annotated script with cues
- have a cue sheet for operation to include levels, timing, fades
- know about the use of special effects – how are they made, what equipment is used, what is a foley engineer, etc.?
- know about the use of voiceovers – who to use, and why and how are they used?
- know how to achieve balance for the audience with the actors
- understand if there is extraneous noise needing covering.

Assessment for learning



This blog post looks at basic sounds:

[Sound Design for Theatre - Illuminated Integration](#)

Most common causes of centres not passing

Concept proforma

- Lack of focus and questions not having been addressed.
- Lack of academic rigour.

Performance – acting

- Under-rehearsed pieces.
- Role not demanding enough for A Level.
- Insufficient exposure.
- Poor choice of text so not enough opportunity to demonstrate a range of skills.

Performance – design

- Not demanding enough.
- Lack of research.
- Insufficient evidence of original ideas, development and exploration.
- Standard not the equivalence of an acting role.

Avoiding potential malpractice

Malpractice is rare in this examination, but there is one area candidates and centres need to be aware of in the concept proforma. As it is dealing with a group activity, it is likely 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 concept proforma are their own work and not a composite of what their group has done where everyone writes in a similar way. The response must be a personal response. It is essential sources are acknowledged to prevent allegations of chunks of material being copied straight from a source. Centres should be aware of the challenge of AI being used to construct responses to questions. If AI is used, the content should be identified clearly in the concept proforma, with the source noted indicating the date and time that it was accessed.

In performances, the opportunities for malpractice are limited. The only example seen in recent years was when sections of text had been written on various pieces of the set and on props, which was easily observed by the examiner. If a mobile phone is to be used as part of a characterisation, care should be taken by the candidate to make sure there is no performance text on it, and it may be advisable to make the examiner aware if the candidate is to have the phone for a considerable period during the performance.

OCR support



The [A Level Drama and Theatre specification](#) offers an extensive glossary of subject-specific vocabulary and terminology, with which candidates should be familiar.

Additional comments

Some of the texts used in the 2024 and 2025 series.

Playwright	Text
Geraldine Aron	<i>The Donahue Sisters</i>
Patrick Barlow	<i>The 39 Steps</i>
Mike Bartlett	<i>Bull</i>
Samuel Beckett	<i>Waiting for Godot</i>
Kim Bellflower	<i>John Proctor is the Villain</i>
Steven Berkoff	<i>The Trial</i>
Andrew Bovell	<i>Things I Know to be True</i>
Moira Buffini	<i>Dinner</i>
Amelia Bullmore	<i>Di and Viv and Rose</i>
Chris Bush	<i>Faustus That Damned Woman</i>
Jim Cartwright	<i>Two</i>
Jim Cartwright	<i>Road</i>
Caryl Churchill	<i>Love and Information</i>
Caryl Churchill	<i>Top Girls</i>
Caryl Churchill	<i>Escaped Alone</i>
Noel Coward	<i>Hay Fever</i>
Sarah Daniels	<i>The Gut Girls</i>
April De Angelis	<i>Playhouse Creatures</i>
Denise Deegan	<i>Daisy Pulls It Off</i>
Neil Docking	<i>The Revlon Girl</i>
Beth Flintoff	<i>The Ballad of Maria Marten</i>
Dario Fo	<i>The Accidental Death of an Anarchist</i>
Adapted by Kerry Frampton	<i>Everyman</i>
Richard Gadd	<i>Baby Reindeer</i>
John Godber	<i>It Started With a Kiss</i>
John Godber	<i>Shakers</i>
James Graham	<i>Bassett</i>
Zinnie Harris	<i>The Scent of Roses</i>
Lucas Hnath	<i>A Doll's House, Part 2</i>
Kneehigh	<i>Tristan and Yseult</i>
Henrik Ibsen	<i>Hedda Gabler</i>
Debbie Isitt	<i>The Woman Who Cooked her Husband</i>
Lewis, Shields and Sayer	<i>The Play That Goes Wrong</i>
Lewis, Shields and Sayer	<i>Peter Pan Goes Wrong</i>

Playwright	Text
Evan Linder and Andrew Hobgood	<i>Five Lesbians Eating a Quiche</i>
Duncan Macmillan	<i>Lungs</i>
Duncan Macmillan	<i>People, Places and Things</i>
Stephen Mallatratt	<i>The Woman in Black</i>
Arthur Miller	<i>A View From The Bridge</i>
Rona Munro	<i>The Last Witch</i>
Anthony Neilson	<i>Edward Gant's Amazing Feats of Loneliness</i>
Vinay Patel	<i>Sticks and Stones</i>
John Pielmier	<i>Agnes of God</i>
Evan Placey	<i>Girls Like That</i>
Lucy Prebble	<i>The Effect</i>
Philip Ridley	<i>Radiant Vermin</i>
Niklas Radstrom	<i>Monsters - a play about the killing of James Bulger</i>
Nina Raine	<i>Rabbit</i>
Mark Ravenhill	<i>Pool (No Water)</i>
Reduced Shakespeare Company	<i>The complete works of Shakespeare (abridged)</i>
Yasmina Reza	<i>Art</i>
Danny Robins	<i>2:22 A Ghost Story</i>
Jean Paul Sartre	<i>No Exit</i>
William Shakespeare	<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>
William Shakespeare	<i>The Tempest</i>
Sophocles	<i>Antigone</i>
Sophie Treadwell	<i>Machinal</i>
Beth Steel	<i>Til the Stars Come Down</i>
Shelagh Stephenson	<i>The Memory of Water</i>
Jack Thorne	<i>Let The Right One In</i>
Jack Thorne	<i>After Life</i>
Sue Townsend	<i>Bazaar and Rummage</i>
Tom Wells	<i>Broken Biscuits</i>
Tom Wells	<i>The Kitchen Sink</i>
Oscar Wilde	<i>The Importance of Being Earnest</i>
Ian Wooldridge	<i>Animal Farm</i>

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