

# **Drama Studies**

2010 ASSESSMENT REPORT

Arts Learning Area



Government  
of South Australia

**SACE**  
Board of SA

# **DRAMA STUDIES**

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### **ASSESSMENT COMPONENT 2: WRITTEN EXAMINATION**

#### **General Comments**

This year the examination was conscientiously undertaken, with almost every student offering full and engaging answers to both sections of the paper. While it is certainly true that drama is an art form which is based on doing, it is important that teachers and students continue to recognise that understanding and being articulate about the history and theory of drama are essential to good practice.

The answers were, for the most part, legible and accurately written. Students are reminded to check their spelling; some errors included 'Strickly Ballroom', 'scence', and 'tradgedy'. Few students demonstrated the vocabulary and analytic flair that comes from a detailed, extensive reading in the subject. This loss of richness in vocabulary is being replaced with an unsuitable style of arts commentary taken from radio, television, and websites which is informal, colloquial, opinionated, superficial, and impressionistic.

Teachers are encouraged to emphasise the need for a challenging level of reading and analytical writing. PowerPoint presentations and essays created from downloads of inaccurate or superficial websites restrict students in practising the analytical skill required in the individual construction of a well-formed and well-expressed essay in response to a considered question.

Students are encouraged to be succinct and to begin to consider the director's concept and the particulars of their production very early in any discussion. An important element is a feeling of enthusiasm in the expression of student ideas, and the need for students to go to extra effort beyond basic classroom information. Many students demonstrated some understanding and knowledge but factual errors, loss of precision in expression, hyperbole, and generalisation detracted from the discussion. There was a tendency for too much recount of what happened in a play or film without sufficient, or sometimes any, discussion of why or how.

Questions answered from an actor's point of view were the least successful. There was superficial reference to voice (loud, soft), or body language (aggressive, humble), without specific reference to how the actor responds to particular features of text, the style, or intention, and the specific features of his or her performance. Acting style is a concept that students found difficult to discuss in a meaningful way. It should always be specifically connected to the text, the character, and the style of the performance. The less successful students continue to produce checklist, formulaic discussion.

#### **Section 1: Production Study**

##### **Questions 1 and 2 — *Brecht, The Caucasian Chalk Circle***

The clearly defined style of Brecht's work tends to keep student thoughts focused. Students provided clear links between theory and practice, although specific examples of how it would actually be done in performance were sometimes superficial. At times, textual knowledge was too thinly described. Brecht's general influence is undoubtedly enormous and he provides higher intellectual value for capable students.

### **Questions 3 and 4 — Euripides, The Bacchae**

This play and the other Greek classics provide broader opportunities for students to forge more innovative concepts for staging, while addressing timeless and universal issues. It has great potential for interesting and inventive productions.

### **Questions 5 and 6 — Jane Harrison, Stolen**

This is a popular text and one about which students showed a good general understanding. Students were able to form a clear picture of the characters they were discussing and present ideas of staging and symbolism, although these were mostly taken straight from the script. It seems to be a memorable and accessible text for Year 12 students and raises important issues for all Australians.

### **Questions 7 and 8 — Dorothy Hewitt, The Chapel Perilous**

Though very much of its time, this play does contain interesting changes in style and demonstrates how Brecht's ideas, and those of others, may be realised. A strong central female character is a feature that female students enjoy. The play provides quite a good focus on genre and is interesting historically for Australian students. Students who wrote about this play produced generally successful responses.

### **Questions 9 and 10 — Eugène Ionesco, Rhinoceros**

Most students understood the theme of the play, which is the blind acceptance of the process of establishing a totalitarian state, or indoctrinating a population with any idea. The responses indicated an appreciation of the genre, the language, theatricality, characterisation, and the potential for comedy.

Sometimes a literal interpretation lost the absurd approach and made it rather more agitprop or social comment. Literal interpretations did not demonstrate dramatic ways to present this idea happening in a community. This play provides good potential for interesting and unusual design concepts. Less successful responses became disconnected from the content and style of the script.

### **Questions 11 and 12 — Alfred Jarry, Ubu Roi**

Students enjoy this play, but need to be given a way into its anarchy of language, characters, and events. A commedia/circus-based or absurdist analysis seems to work. It does elicit imaginative ideas for staging. Students find the play's historical importance and shocking impact interesting, and its links to the absurd and dada are taken up well. Students enjoy *Ubu Roi* as a way of experimenting with exaggerated characters and taking a satirical look at the divisions in, and institutions of, society.

### **Questions 13 and 14 — Joan Littlewood/Theatre Workshop, Oh, What a Lovely War!**

This is a superb text to experiment with Brechtian ideas for the stage, changing and adapting diverse styles and the use of different material to make a social comment. It is also a useful script for exploring the elements of circus, music hall, tableaux, and dance, and matching projected images with live actors.

Students need to have a well-developed sense of social-class structure to fully engage with this play. It offers wide scope for experiment with design, acting, and overall approach to performance. There needs to be a clear understanding of the potential physicality of the play in the war action, dancing, and mime. Connections can be made about how this play is relevant to a modern audience, but there can be too much discussion of what happens in

the text and not how this would be precisely translated onto the stage to make the show visually exciting.

The pierrot costumes can be a barrier to discussion of costuming in general. The play does require a wide range of costume ideas to create different situations; for example, in the ballroom, for civilian life, and for life in the trenches. Comprehensive design answers should consider all aspects of the visual, including set and lights, and not just costumes.

### **Questions 15 and 16 — *Louis Nowra, Così***

This is one of the most popular texts. It engages students to discuss and envision character relationships and how they might appear on stage. The clear Australian characters and the potential for comedy appeals, as does the historical circumstances of the 1970s student protest movement. Students need to have a well-developed sense of the context of the time in which *Così* is set to do well with this play. However, lengthy general discussion about the Vietnam War and the youth revolution with no reference to the play should be avoided.

Students must have a clear idea of stagecraft when scenery is changed before suggesting impractical set modifications between scenes. The naturalism of the play does limit design approaches, but the script has the advantage of being written in a language style familiar to most students. Students' difficulties with discussing approaches to acting were evident in discussing this play. For example, 'I would use angry body language' and 'I would have my actors stand fidgeting nervously' demonstrate a superficial and simplistic view of acting a character.

The detailed understanding of the text needed to produce good answers was often missing. Descriptions of characters are not adequate; some students showed only a superficial understanding of the characters, dismissing the complex changes that occur as the play proceeds. Students need to choose insightful and important scenes to discuss. Following the process from a clear production concept, through rehearsal to performance, is the way to success.

### **Questions 17 and 18 — *Peter Schaffer, Equus***

This play seems to strike a chord with students who deal with the aberrant themes of the play with insight and often with a strong empathy for Alan and the 'individual' in society. It integrates an accessible but challenging premise/plot with naturalistic and non-naturalistic dramatic presentation. *Equus* allows a platform for Brecht, Artaud, and expressionistic approaches. Students understand the spiritual elements of the play and can connect these to the physical and visual. There is a generally good understanding of Alan and Dysart's world and this leads to imaginative ideas for staging.

This text attracted many 'valiant' answers, although Schaffer's intent and style were sometimes not clearly understood. Many students had developed quite extensive stage concepts that highlighted the themes of individuality and passion in life against conformity and rigid belief systems. Some of the design answers were mundane or impractical. Students found it difficult to adequately explain how non-verbals would be presented. Students need to be made aware that they have to show their knowledge of the text and that all staging suggestions must stay close to it.

### **Questions 19 and 20 — *William Shakespeare, A Midsummer Night's Dream***

Shakespeare's plays offer students great opportunities for very creative and innovative production concepts. There is an unfortunate tendency to make superficial claims such as 'I am going to modernise' the play, as if this will automatically make it succeed. There is also a desire to want to update the language. Of course, this immediately reveals a lack of understanding of the beauty, nature, and complexity of Shakespeare's language. There can

be a tendency to focus on costume as a way of keeping Shakespeare up with fashion, rather than using costume to help reveal the ideas and nature of the characters in the play. The dramatic purpose and style of the fairies can be too influenced by Disney-style, modern stereotypes, rather than evidence from the text.

Shakespeare opens up many options, but the text must always be in the forefront, not just a starting point for bizarre ideas.

### **Questions 21 and 22 — *Tennessee Williams, A Streetcar Named Desire***

This is another popular text that students seem to like and relate to. There is a tendency to see the struggle between Blanche and Stanley as the main element of the play. Students like the character of Blanche and can discuss her motivation and nature, fragility, and states of mind very fluently.

Students need to study all the other details of Williams' text, stage directions, social context, and other characters to move beyond a discussion of what happens to the two main characters. They need to be able to discuss how one would meaningfully present the whole play on stage. There is often an absence of what students are going to do to make their particular production modern or relevant or exciting or distinctive. There needs to be an understanding of expressionistic and stylised staging ideas based on the text, to avoid simplistic, literal interpretations. The less successful acting answers contained generalised comments, such as 'I would use my facial expression and body language in this scene'.

## **Section 2: Contemporary Innovators**

### **Questions 23 and 24 — *Augusto Boal***

Students seem to know Boal's different forms of theatrical experimentation and can give a summary and simple appraisal of them. However, they need to go beyond just describing the activities to also analysing the outcomes. Boal seems to intrigue students by his unusual approach to theatre, but they can only retell the examples of, say, 'Image Theatre', without meaningfully exploring the concept.

This lack of personal involvement in the process of Boal's experiments gives a second-hand feel to the discussion. Students should make references to successful experiments that they had tried to inform their response.

### **Questions 25 and 26 — *Caryl Churchill***

*Cloud Nine* and *Mad Forest* seem to be the two most popular of Churchill's plays, with *Top Girls* coming a close third. She is a practitioner who can be very successfully used to demonstrate how non-naturalistic playing with form can be used on stage. A worthwhile integration of Brechtian ideas is also possible. Students analyse the events and the intent behind Churchill's stylistic choices, particularly in her discussion of feminist ideas and her challenging of the audience's perceptions of social truths.

### **Questions 27 and 28 — *Rolf de Heer***

Most students find the films accessible and, as a result, produce perceptive analyses of form and intention. *The Tracker* and *Ten Canoes* are the two most popular choices. De Heer provides an opportunity to explore documentary formats and the use of a variety of filmic devices and historical references to compose films. De Heer's work produces clear discussion of film-making techniques.

### **Questions 29 and 30 — Baz Luhrmann**

Luhrmann was discussed by a large number of students. This is a testament to his popular and accessible style and to his use of contemporary music and commercial imagery. The most popular texts are *Strictly Ballroom* and *Moulin Rouge*, with *Romeo and Juliet* a close third. Few students considered *Australia*, which would have opened up options beyond the prepared and regurgitated 'Red Curtain Trilogy' answers.

Many answers are extensive but identical. There is no sense of immediacy from the film; only a formulaic, prepared response. Students do enjoy these films and have plenty to say about them. However, there is a sense that, with a few exceptions, each student is writing the same answer with the same detail often in the same order. Luhrmann's work offers more options for discussion, such as postmodernism and universal myths, historical film genres, and his approach to film acting, which is certainly unusual.

### **Questions 31 and 32 — Physical Theatre**

This is a genre that is both inspirational and enjoyable for the students who study it. Students find exciting the immense, non-verbal stage language opportunities that are offered from dance to mime, projections to tableaux. Students usually show a solid understanding of how physical theatre communicates ideas and images, but tend to stay at the descriptive level without much analysis or insightful interpretation. This is a style that lends itself to experimentation and application in the interpretation of texts and in self-devised pieces.

### **Questions 33 and 34 — Julie Taymor**

Taymor is a rising star in the innovators' section. *Across the Universe*, *Frida*, and *Oedipus* are the popular film choices, with some students discussing *The Lion King* stage production. Taymor seems to generate variation and flexibility of responses, probably because of her wide variety of sources of inspiration, and she provides challenging and extending material. Students also recognise the versatility Taymor employs as she moves from one medium to another. There is also the possibility of demonstrating how her ideas are adapted and utilised in a variety of dramatic ways.

### **Questions 35 and 36 — Zhang Yimou**

This innovator is unique because of his accessible but non-Western symbolism and subject matter. The most popular films are *Raise the Red Lantern*, *The Road Home*, *Hero*, and *The House of Flying Daggers*, which provide valuable focus and a wide variety of film techniques. The task of studying a different culture also provides stimulation and originality in student responses.

The danger is that complex ideas of religion and symbolism are reduced to a simplistic formula when it comes to discussing symbolism. Students are able to discuss individual film techniques, but find it more difficult to create a sense of the final product. Successful students can appreciate the visual and auditory style, and produce the opportunity for students to deliver exceptionally thoughtful responses.

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