

# Introduction

This pack offers a structured approach to devising stylised theatre. It is concerned with the teaching of style and structure and is suitable for GCSE and KS3 students.

*Pick and Mix* offers a complete scheme of work for teachers who want to teach about style and structure. The exercises also work as stand-alone lessons or as programmes of study. Students in KS3 can be taught the techniques in preparation for GCSE. All the exam boards require GCSE students to devise theatre. This pack provides an approach that will encourage and allow students to produce devised stylised plays in groups.

## What is a pick and mix approach?

The analogy is the pick and mix counter in a sweet shop; each container is filled with a different kind of sweet. The child comes along and chooses sweets from some or all of the containers (they might even choose sweets from only one container). They then end up with a bag of sweets.

In the pick and mix approach to devising plays, students pick from a variety of theatre forms and styles and mix them together to produce a finished devised play (they might even choose only one theatre form). The theatre forms and styles are the different containers and the full bag of sweets is the finished devised play.

## Why stylised theatre?

The style that students are naturally drawn to when they devise plays is sometimes called 'EastEnders naturalism'. Unfortunately, such a style is not theatrical because it is televisual in its origins and does not easily translate to live performance. Most students do not go to the theatre, they watch the majority of their drama on TV and occasionally at the cinema; moreover, they are very selective about the sort of TV that they watch – they will only watch what they like, ie soaps and domestic dramas. So it's no wonder that when you ask a group of students to 'make up a play' they will, more often than not, go to the only style they are familiar with. This style is characterised by having short scenes and an emphasis on narrative. It appears to be 'realistic'; it deals with themes that seem relevant to the audience and many of the characters are young. Locations are invariably domestic: home, school, the coffee bar, etc. The sharp televisual cut from scene to scene, a device which drives the narrative and keeps up momentum on TV, is replaced in this type of GCSE drama by the blackout – a poor theatrical device which contrives to do precisely the opposite.

On a simple level, stylised theatre is more fun and interesting. When students go to the theatre they are often drawn to that theatre which is an exercise in style, for example, *The Lion King* and other musicals. Theatre seems to be moving towards an interest in stylised production, eg Cirque du Soleil, the work of Robert Lepage, *Shockheaded Peter*, *Trestle* and others (see page 62 for more information). There is even a resurgence of interest in farce.

# Farce

## Physical comedy

This is a development of the work on entrances and exits (pages 9 to 11).

With a growing interest in physical and stylised theatre there is a resurgence of farce as a theatre form. A good definition of farce is that it is comedy in which the humour comes from the physical situations that the characters find themselves in.

### Farce workshop



#### Exercise

In groups, devise and perform a play that consists of entrances and exits. The play is performed in silence as a mime. Noises off are allowed providing there is no speech. Use a music sound track – ragtime and silent film sound tracks work well.

You should consider the following points:

- **Basic set** – The group will need as many entrances and exits as possible. Four book flats: two stage left and two stage right, plus a central curtain entrance will give a total of seven entrances.
- **Location** – The stage is a corridor in the *Hôtel Splendide*. The entrances and exits are entrances into bedrooms off the corridor.
- **Characters** – Only the following characters are available:
  - the hotel manager
  - porters
  - chambermaids
  - waiters
  - unattached young ladies
  - unattached gentlemen
  - husbands
  - wives.



### Exercise: Building and using a mask character

- 1 Take the mask and stare at the face. Focus and concentrate very hard.
- 2 Make your face into a copy of the mask. Hold the position and put on the mask.
- 3 Build the character: find a body to go with the face and find out how this mask/character moves.
- 4 Walk around the room and, as you do so, meet other masks. Greet them and react to them.
- 5 Put the mask/character in costume. Hats and wigs are very important because they can be used to hide the line of the mask on the face.
- 6 Place your mask/character in a simple scene and improvise the scene. Keep the plot of the scene very simple: the masks arrive, they wait, they leave.

Examples of possible scenes:

- A bus queue.
- Waiting for an interview.
- Wedding guests arriving.

Devising full-face mask theatre is very improvisational. It is often a question of putting one mask in a scene with a different mask, seeing what happens and then discussing the scene and repeating it. Plots for scenes should be kept very simple because the focus of the scene should be the mask.

### Simple plots for full-face mask plays

- Mask A enters and is given time to settle onstage. Mask B enters with a birthday present or flowers. Mask A accepts or rejects the present. Try both.
- Mask A enters and sits down. Mask B enters and sees that mask A is sitting on their seat.
- Mask A enters with an object that is precious to them. Mask B enters; they covet the object and take it when mask A is not looking. Mask A is upset at the loss of the object.

### Using masks in a pick and mix play

- The pick and mix approach is about making stylised theatre so it would be perfectly acceptable for the whole play to be a mask piece.
- Telling a story using half-masked characters not only looks interesting but it also allows the cast to play more than one character and look completely different for each one.
- The group could use masks as one section of a stylised play. This could be simply for effect or it could be to allow the introduction of lots of new characters. For example, the arrival of a dozen different wedding guests could be performed as a full-face mask piece.

# Freeze-frames

## A static picture in which there is no movement

This is a widely used technique in drama teaching. It is very useful for handling difficult dramatic moments, eg a death, a car accident, an execution. To attempt such difficult moments naturalistically will often trivialise them or make them appear banal. Still pictures have a distancing effect and allow the audience time to think and become involved. The audience is provided with the opportunity to imagine the action which will often be better than anything that can be provided on a stage.

A good freeze-frame will:

- tell a story – we should recognise the characters, understand their emotions, know what they are doing and see the expressions on their faces
- be focused towards the audience
- be as carefully framed as a painted picture or a professional photograph.

Freeze-frames can be composed from the following menu:

- Still picture
- Still picture with:
  - music to heighten emotional involvement
  - sound effects
  - narration.

## Freeze-frame workshop



### Exercise 1: Devising a freeze-frame

Take a photograph from a book or newspaper and recreate it onstage as a freeze-frame.



### Exercise 2

Devise a freeze-frame to illustrate a diary extract. The following is given as an example:

*When the whistle went I clambered out of the trench. There were lads falling all over the place. You didn't know whether they were just tripping up or whether they were going down with bullets in them because it wasn't just the shells exploding. It was the machine guns hammering out like hell.*

### Variations

- Hold the still picture while the quotation is spoken as a piece of narration.
- Play a suitable piece of music or sound effect to accompany the still picture and the narration.

# Dreams

**Topic: Dreams****Story: Personal experience**

Recounting a dream as a piece of GCSE theatre should allow students to score high marks in GCSE exam board assessment objectives that relate to imagination and creativity. Again, it is important to stick to the 'story' and not to treat it as a fantasy, even though that may well be the result; an invented dream will rarely be as interesting as the 'real' thing. Dramatising a dream should lead to experimentation with theatre form and style.

**Starting with truth**

In groups of four, each student recounts a dream they have had to the other members of the group. It is important to recount the dream as accurately as possible. The group should now have four stories that form the basis of the play.

## The play

- 1 As a piece of **presentation**, the group or a member of the group gives the audience a dictionary or a Freudian definition of dreams.
- 2 Dream one is performed as **an image of the abstract**.
- 3 Dream two is performed as a **physicalised monologue**, perhaps with a music background.
- 4 Dream three is performed as **an image of the abstract**.
- 5 Dream four is performed as a **physicalised monologue** perhaps with a music background.
- 6 **Music link**.
- 7 To finish, the group creates a **freeze-frame** entitled 'Dreaming'.

The production of the play will benefit from the use of lights, music and sound effects. Such a play works best when the actors wear neutral costumes, eg black and then add hats and small items of clothing.