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A LEVEL

# Drama and Theatre

7262/X

Report on the Examination

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## The role of the NEA Adviser and the play approval process

### Role of the Adviser

The role of the Non-Exam Assessment (NEA) Adviser is three-fold:

- to support teachers in their interpretation and thus delivery of the specification
- to uphold the integrity of the specification in accordance with Ofqual requirements
- to implement the play approval process.

### Who are the advisers?

NEA advisers are a team of highly experienced A and AS Level teachers selected by AQA to offer advice and guidance to teachers of the AQA specification.

### What advice may NEA advisers give to teachers?

- Advice on the administration of the practical components of the course (Components 2 and 3).
- Advice related to play combination choices (Component 3).
- Advice related to the requirements of the specification where teachers require **clarification** of points made in the published specification (it is assumed that teachers will have a thorough working knowledge of the specification document for the subject that they are teaching).

### What advice falls outside the remit of NEA advisers?

- Anything to do with the written component (Component 1) queries about the written exam should be directed to the subject team at AQA.
- **Recommendation** of plays and/or practitioners, in the first instance, although advisers may be able to suggest possible avenues for teachers/students to explore for themselves.

### The Play Approval Process

- The play approval requirement caught some centres unawares in this first year of certification of the new A Level, resulting in very high volume of play approval forms (PAFs) being submitted late in January (the deadline is 31<sup>st</sup> January in each year) and sometimes only just before the actual Component 3 exam.
- Page 32 in the specification states '... centres... are urged to seek approval as early as possible'.
- Many teachers contacted their adviser very early in this process, discussing their students' choices with their adviser before submitting their form(s) for final approval; this avoided students wasting time working on inappropriate choices that contravened the rubric for the examination.
- Advisers considered each form and combination of plays on its own merits whilst at the same time applying the criteria listed on page 31 of the specification for permissible and non-permissible play combinations.
- Advisers were always looking for reasons to approve combinations and the majority of PAFs were approved at their first submission.
- Where combinations were not approved it was for the following reasons:
  - very obscure plays which had been downloaded from the internet and had not been professionally commissioned or produced but had been self-published online
  - plays which would not last more than 35 minutes if performed in full
  - plays not offering an appropriate level of theatrical challenge to students at A Level
  - plays that were too similar to each other in terms of social, cultural **and** historical context 'as depicted in the plays'
  - plays that were the same genre as one of the set texts chosen for Component 1; the most common were those plays that were historicised drama if studying *Our Country's Good*, 20th century expressionist plays combined with the study of *Metamorphosis* and 19th century naturalistic plays where *Hedda Gabler* was a set text selected.

## **Administration**

### **Pre-exam Arrangements and Paperwork**

Most centres responded to initial contacts promptly and dates were arranged for mutually convenient days and times.

Some centres had to be 'chased' several times, where the initial contact with the exams office had not been forwarded to the right person in the drama department or where the Head of Drama underestimated the urgency of securing a favoured date.

Most centres sent through the Schedule, Play Approval form(s) and selected texts with the extract marked, in each one, at least four weeks before the exam date.

Some centres did not send Play Approval forms, initially, or sent them through unsigned.

Some centres sent just the extract of the text(s) studied, which was acceptable *only* if pre-agreed with the examiner prior to sending the materials to him/her.

### **Exam Day Arrangements**

Most centres arranged for a parking space to be available and reserved for the visiting examiner.

Almost all centres had arranged for a marking space to be made available to the examiner, away from the performance space; this was a much-appreciated courtesy.

Most centres provided running orders, programme notes and statements of dramatic intentions at the start of the session. Some programme notes included photographs that were too small to be helpful and/or were taken when the student entered the school/college in year 7 or 12; it would be very useful to have photographs taken *specifically* for the purpose of identification for this exam, with students wearing the costumes that they are to wear in the performance and to have the same hair style as worn for the performance; teachers may not appreciate that examiners are required to send samples of their marking to their Team Leaders during the marking period and for a Team Leader, who has not met the students 'in the flesh', it has occasionally been very tricky identifying individuals filmed at a distance and with only the aid of a small, grainy photo to guide them.

Some teachers had not appreciated that Reflective Reports had to be completed by students, before the examination, and, in these instances, the reports were not made available either for the examiner to check that they were complete or to take away with them for marking. Some teachers had, mistakenly, marked the Reflective Reports, having missed the phrase in the specification 'It is marked by AQA'.

Most centres either provided a marking table for the examiner or asked if one was needed.

Some centres had to be reminded of the requirement for candidates to state their name, number, specialism and role(s) played if performing.

The vast majority of exam performances ran smoothly and on or ahead of the running order timings.

Centres are reminded of the need to meet the timing rubrics outlined in the specification as students who fail to meet these timings run the risk of either self-penalising or being awarded a mark of zero.

Many centres were able to provide recordings and Reflective Reports on the exam day and almost all ensured that materials not taken by the examiner reached them within the ten-day period stipulated in the specification.

### **Statements of Dramatic Intentions**

The best examples showed a real engagement with the chosen text and provided clear intentions linked to the work of their chosen practitioners.

Weaker examples provided a couple of lines of general hopes and aims along the lines of entertaining their audience or producing a good performance.

For all skills, clear and succinct Statements of Dramatic Intentions were helpful to the examiner and more successful students met these intentions in performance.

Reference to students' intentions that outlined how they were using the practitioners' methodologies and aims were the most useful; with practitioners whose cannon is broad, it is helpful if students explain which aspects of the practitioners' work are being applied.

### **Selection of the extracts**

Several centres had misunderstood the term "abridgement" in the specification and offered an edited version of the entire script, sometimes taking 'extracts' from the whole, sometimes taking individual lines from sections, with no consideration of the playwright's intentions.

Some groups omitted characters without considering the impact their omission would make in this context. Students are expected to show an understanding of the original play and an appropriate treatment of the material, which was not always evident.

Many teachers encouraged their entire cohort to work on the same extract or extracts from the same play for extracts 1 and/or 2. This was sometimes beneficial, particularly for mid-low achieving students as it gave structure to their work-shopping and their developing performance skills.

Some teachers/students chose a broad range of extracts and practitioners, for example all students offering a different monologue with a different practitioner applied; while this obviously added variety to the work of the students, it is worth noting that each practitioner applied to Extract 3 must be rigorously researched and their ideas applied explicitly and recognisably, in performance, as well as in the Reflective Report, in order to access mark bands 3, 4 and 5 for Part B of their performance mark.

As stated in the specification, groups could potentially face penalties if the extracts do not meet the minimum time requirements in performance; some extracts were very close to the minimum time limit, and in some cases gave the students rather limited opportunities to show their best work.

At the other end of the scale, some groups of three or more chose to work to the upper end of the time limit, where a tighter and more focused performance would have been beneficial; students need to be conscious of showing their skills to the best advantage with the support and advice of their teachers.

In a very few cases, it appeared that teachers had offered too much direction of the work in contravention of the rubric in the specification.

Some teachers had failed to understand the regulations regarding non-examinees in this new specification where they are only permitted to '*make the group size up to the minimum of performers*' as students, at A level, may perform a monologue for each of their extracts, there is no

occasion where any individual A Level student requires the support of a non-examinee; students should be encouraged to select extracts that suit the group size in which they are working.

### **Practitioners**

The majority of centres chose practitioners whose aims and methodologies were appropriate to the style and content of the extracts and allowed students to explore the work effectively.

Some students selected inappropriate extracts for the practitioners that they had chosen, or they attempted to force some features of a chosen practitioner into their interpretation of an unsuitable text.

It was very pleasing to see a wider choice of practitioners being used than was commonly seen with the previous specification; good work was seen which was clearly influenced by, for example, Polly Findlay, Julie Taymor, Ralph Koltai, Dario Fo, Bob Crowley, Alison Chitty, John Napier, Mike Alfreds, Gecko and Forkbeard Fantasy as well as those that we are used to seeing such as Frantic Assembly, Kneehigh, Complicite, DV8, Max Stafford-Clark, Berkoff, Katie Mitchell, Brecht, Stanislavski and Artaud; most of these practitioners were generally applied appropriately and to suitable texts although there were some exceptions, see below; in these cases while some generic features of the practitioner's style were evident, the practitioner's aims were insufficiently considered.

The majority of teachers/students chose practitioners whose work was accessible or whose work was well-documented and researchable; a few students had chosen practitioners whose work, although accessible and well-documented, was not researched in sufficient depth or detail.

Some students chose practitioners whose work was completely unfamiliar to them and failed to provide evidence of their understanding of the practitioner's work in their performances or in their Reflective Reports.

In a very few cases, students chose practitioners who do not appear on the prescribed list in the specification; this mistake impacted on both Part B of the performance mark and also on the mark awarded for the Reflective Report.

### **The Reflective Reports**

#### **Positive aspects seen**

Students used a variety of structures for their Reflective Reports, which was entirely acceptable where the structures were clear and focused. Word counts were included. These are very useful for this externally marked coursework. Good reports had taken into consideration the demands of the task, as outlined in the specification and repeated, for convenience, below.

For assessment, students **must** discuss:

- the opportunities and challenges presented by their three extracts
- their theatrical interpretations for each key extract, including how this was informed by:
  - the genre and style of the play
  - the social, cultural and historical contexts of the play
  - the work and methodology of their selected prescribed practitioner, where appropriate.
- how successful their theatrical interpretations are in fulfilling their aims and communicating the intended meaning, during the workshopping of material.

The majority of reports gave reasons for their choices and showed a secure understanding of the social, cultural and historical context of their chosen extracts. Good reports showed how all

aspects of their research and development had impacted on their interpretation and development of their three extracts. The best reports gave clear, detailed and specific illustration of the effect on practical development with reference to moments of preparation and performance.

Some reports had adopted a “holistic” approach very successfully.

Good reports showed detail of the development of all extracts and evaluated both the development of their interpretation and the development of their personal skill/specialism.

They also used the practitioners’ methodologies to develop their work, particularly, but not exclusively, in relation to Extract 3. Some students made useful reference to productions that they had seen and usefully referred to their influence on their own work. Where students discussed the effect that research and experience had had on their exploration and development of the extracts, they were generally successful.

Reports often commented on how the production “team” worked together and how this had developed personal skill, which was helpful and showed practical understanding; particularly effective were reports which detailed how designers had worked with performers to problem solve and develop production ideas.

Good reports made reference to specific key moments in the extracts, often linked to succinct reference to text; this clear illustration allowed examiners to visualise the process with more clarity and understanding. Good design reports were well illustrated with photographs and diagrams which were integrated in the text of the report, including cue sheets and design sketches as appropriate.

Given that this is the first year of the new specification, it was pleasing that a wide range of skills had been covered, generally with success.

### **Less good practice**

Some students appeared to think that they had to adopt a comparative approach to the extracts and got themselves tied in knots attempting to achieve this within a ‘holistic’ structure at the expense of focus on detail and developing skill; there is **no requirement** for students to compare one extract with another; for most students, an ‘extract by extract’ approach works best.

Weaker reports made very generalised comments about their discoveries during the process, revealing limited application of both practitioner and any live productions seen; these documents tended to be descriptive and narrative rather than analytical and evaluative.

Some students did not realise that the marking criteria refer to detail in “all three” extracts and offered considerably more detail about Extract 3 with only perfunctory detail of Extracts 1 and 2; this was self-limiting.

Occasionally a practitioner had been listed on the Candidate Record Form for either Extract 1 or 2, but the student failed to refer to that practitioner, at all, in the Reflective Report.

Some students gave insufficient consideration to the development of their own skill; better reports offered good detail of how exploration of each extract had contributed to their personal development.

Some students made reference to several practitioners’ work for Extract 3 which contravened the rubric, resulting in a confused focus.

Less successful reports made reference to aspects of live productions that they had seen which were not well linked to their intentions, the practitioner's work or were not presented coherently.

Some students wrote about a very narrow range of their chosen practitioner's methods, for example, choosing Frantic Assembly, but only referencing 'Hymn hands' or 'Chair duets'.

Some students revealed a very restricted understanding of their chosen practitioner; the least understood practitioner this year was probably Brecht; with a wealth of published material available about Brecht's theories (much written by the practitioner himself) students instead relied on inaccurate representations of Brecht's work provided by some touring 'TIE' groups purporting to work in his style.

Some students did not understand what 'interpretation' means and failed to offer an interpretation of their chosen extract or role.

Some reports revealed that the teacher had intervened in their work in ways that contravene the spirit of the specification, including phrases such as 'we were told to...'

Students frequently 'gave away' other contraventions of the rubric as they discussed approaches to Extracts 1 and 2 – while these Extracts are governed by the same regulations as apply to Extract 3, in terms of group size and timings, some students had apparently used full 'school productions' as Extract 1 or 2 or they had work-shopped extracts in group sizes far in excess of 6 performers.

Students sometimes failed to include word counts or labelled the word count at 2,999 when the work was clearly closer to 4,000 words.

Some students struggled to write more than 1,000 words and this work generally failed to meet the requirements of the document.

### **Contribution to Performance**

A full range of performances was seen, including some exceptional performances in Band 5.

There were few very weak performances seen with none in Band 1, and only a handful in Band 2. It was encouraging to see so many accomplished and thoughtful performances, many achieving Band 4 and above.

### **Skills and specialisms**

A broad range of skills was seen.

It was particularly encouraging to see so many good and accomplished young designers. Although teachers do need to advise some students that their designs are assessed wholly in performance. The design should play as effective a role in the success of the performance as the direction (if there is a director) and the performance work.

An understanding of the extract, its contexts, and the playwright's intentions should be evident in the performers', director's and/or designers' interpretation.

Extract 3 should not be seen as a 'stand-alone' vehicle for the display of a practitioner's theories; students should not be attempting to distort the extract to fit the practitioner but rather to execute a 'harmonious marriage' of text and practitioner.

## **Performer**

### **Positive achievements**

Sections from texts that were unedited, or appropriately edited, and of the correct length to enable students to demonstrate performance skills in accordance with the playwright's intention.

Entirely appropriate 'marriage' of practitioner with text and where the choice of practitioner **enabled** the student(s) to reveal the playwright's intentions.

Perfectly executed and appropriate accents to suit the piece; clarity of diction irrespective of accent/dialect.

Precise vocal and physical performance skills that revealed understanding of the demands of both practitioner and text, as well as of the role selected.

Interpretations of individual roles that related, and were fully appropriate, to other roles being performed.

Attention to detail in relation to creating a meaningful theatrical experience for the audience even where all group members were performers.

Some extremely successful performances were seen, showing secure skills and clear dramatic intentions.

### **Less successful work**

Over length; whereby, groups of 2-4 students would have been well-advised to cut down on the amount of material they presented.

Ill-chosen monologues that failed to give students adequate opportunity to demonstrate the range of skills or understanding required to access the highest bands – where these were chosen from monologue books, it was evident that not all students had accessed the full text.

Monologues were often performed directly to the examiner with no apparent awareness of the context of the speech or any consideration of the characters on stage that the speech would be directed at, in a performance of the play.

Occasionally students chose a text that they had seen in live performance and, while this could help develop their ideas and creativity, it occasionally led them into copying the performance they had seen which restricted their own input. A performance of *The 39 Steps*, for example, owed more to the West End performance than it did to the work of Brecht, the nominated practitioner.

Completely inappropriate choice of practitioner or understanding of practitioner so limited that it was impossible to detect their influence in the work; for example, no understanding of the way Frantic Assembly merge physical work with naturalistic performances; or combining the briefest moment of naturalism with mimed objects, direct address and no sense of tempo/rhythm (or emotional truth) for Stanislavski.

Failure to understand the context of the play – poor use of accent or performance style.

Failure to recognise own abilities or limitations of those abilities – attempting physical work without the necessary agility or flexibility.

No attention paid to creating an appropriate environment in which the work could take place; performing against a backdrop of theatre 'debris'.

### **Direction**

Very few students chose direction as an option; of those that did, the most successful were those who communicated clear directorial intention and showed clear influence of the practitioner's style; the hand of the director was evident in the piece.

Successful direction was evidenced in confident and well-rehearsed performers. The performances were coherent and showed intention. It was easy to see the director's purpose behind the whole production values.

Less successful direction was evident in weaker performances in which less detail was evident in direction. For example, a performance from Berkoff's *The Trial* showed insufficient consideration of the crisp movement style expected of performers in his plays; an aspect that a more committed or respected director could have worked upon.

### **Lighting design**

There was some exceptional lighting design, showing confident and mature skills. These extracts covered a range of practitioners and styles, from Shared Experience, Frantic Assembly to Katie Mitchell and Stanislavski. Good work fully embraced the designer's role and showed considerable understanding of the text.

The majority of the students' work seen involved designers who operated the lighting themselves. A few students had instructed a technician, many with great success.

There was generally good, and some exceptional understanding of how lighting could contribute to mood, atmosphere and location. A particularly successful example was the use of lighting for Polly Teale's *Bronte*, which captured the atmosphere of the play and recreated the effects of firelight and candlelight.

Successful lighting designers:

- understood how to work within the limitations of the equipment available to them
- used colour appropriately to support the action on stage
- understood the need to light from all angles
- had made the decision to work with a different, but appropriate, practitioner from the performers.

Less successful lighting designers:

- designed states which were incongruous with the style of the piece
- were over reliant on 'intelligent' moving lights to change colour in an almost random way
- lacked understanding of how to use the equipment
- failed to understand the height required to adequately light from above
- lacked awareness of use of side lights.

### **Sound design**

As with Lighting Design, some confident and accomplished work was seen. There was some particularly effective work showing the influence of (early) Katie Mitchell where the technical support was evident on-stage.

Good work supported and drew audience attention to the key moments of the extracts and these extracts had been chosen to allow students opportunities to demonstrate their skills.

As with lighting design, there was generally good, and some exceptional understanding of how sound could contribute to mood, atmosphere and location. A particular example was of sound design used to create a contemporary interpretation of the fairy world of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which had been successfully set in a summer festival.

As with Lighting Design, most students operated the sound desk themselves, or instructed a technician.

Successful sound designers:

- understood the scope of a sound designer's role
- manipulated sound to create effect and understood the technical aspects of the equipment they were working with
- created and worked with both recorded and live sound.

Less successful sound designers:

- created designs incongruous with style of the piece
- offered a series of music tracks, unedited and not always appropriate to the mood/practitioner chosen
- lacked creative awareness of the scope of sound design
- revealed an apparent lack of rehearsal with performers.

### **Costume design**

Relatively few costume designs were seen. Where costume designers considered the effect of their work in performance, these were successful. A few designers had not considered the impact of their costumes in performance, or how the performers might use them.

There were costume designs which showed understanding of the practitioner but needed to further consider the effect of the costumes when on stage. An example was in a performance of *The Tempest* where Ariel's cloak hemmed him in rather than allowing the flamboyant movement it was intended to enhance. Good costume designs showed evidence of the context and of the demands of performance.

Successful costume designers:

- understood the brief to design one costume
- revealed skills that were consonant with the demands of the piece and the practitioner
- used materials creatively; understanding the potential effects of design fundamentals, colour, shape, fabric, ornamentation, style, fit, condition, headgear, footwear, accessories
- understood the importance of creating a **wearable** costume.

Less successful costume designers:

- failed to recognise the requirement of the specification – generally resulting in a large number of costumes being 'created' with little focused detail for any of them.

### **Set design**

Only a few set designs were seen. A number of designs that were seen, however, showed invention and had considered creative ways of creating an appropriate space for the performance. These designs were often influenced by budget but dealt with this constraint with imagination. There were some very good examples of this professional approach. As with other design skills, the successful set designs showed an understanding of the demands of the performance and ways in which to support the performers.

In some cases set designers claimed the influence of a practitioner, but this was insufficiently evident in the final work for performance.

Successful set designers:

- understood the brief
- revealed skills that were consonant with the demands of the piece and the practitioner
- used materials creatively; understanding the potential effects of design fundamentals, use of space, scale, use of levels, perspective, relationship with the audience
- chose appropriate materials with which to construct the set
- accommodated the action of the extract perfectly including positioning of entrances and exits and/or projection screens, if used
- understood the importance of creating a **useable** setting.

Less successful set designers:

- assembled a collection of items from 'stock' and rearranged them to vaguely approximate the requirements of the setting.

### **Puppet design**

No puppet design has been reported to the Principal Examiner at the time of the compilation of this report we hope to see some in the next examination series.

### **Mark Ranges and Award of Grades**

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results Statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.

### **Converting Marks into UMS marks**

Convert raw marks into Uniform Mark Scale (UMS) marks by using the link below.

[UMS conversion calculator](#)