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PART TWO

Introduction to the set plays; Context, genre and style; form, conventions and techniques; The director’s interpretation: Meaning; The director’s interpretation: Staging decisions; The director’s interpretation: Mood, atmosphere and tension; The director’s interpretation: Comedy; The designer’s interpretation; The performer’s interpretation; Affecting the audience; Preparing a blueprint for a production; Assessment demands; Summary of Part One;
In Part One you will learn:
- how your set play relates to its social, cultural and historical contexts
- how ideas and meaning are communicated to an audience through creative and artistic choices
- how choice of form, style, conventions and techniques may affect audience responses
- how to respond to your set play imaginatively
- specialist terminology.

Exploring a play
In this chapter we will be looking at different ways to explore your chosen play. Sometimes you will be studying your set play in the classroom or at home; and sometimes you will be in a drama studio. Wherever you are and whatever your set task might be, you need to think of yourself as an interpreter of the text.

You need to think about what the playwright is trying to communicate to the audience and how a director, the actors, the designers, or a whole production team working together, might bring the playwright’s intentions to life.

Interpreting a play
Whenever you pick up a new play to read, you become, in effect, a new interpreter of that play. As you read, you begin to imagine what the play would look like on stage, moving the characters around an imaginary space, in your head; visualising the characters’ faces and expressions; imagining their movements and “hearing” their voices speaking the lines that you are reading. In fact, you are already looking at the play with the eyes of a director.

As you read on, you mentally “cast” the characters of the play to fit with the information supplied by the playwright, either in stage directions or in the way that the characters behave and interact with each other, imagining them as youthful or elderly, powerful or weak, beautiful or ugly. Reading a play is always more like being a director than being a member of an audience. The audience is always presented with a play that has been read and interpreted for them; all the casting and staging decisions have already been made. When reading, you are firmly in the director’s chair.

As you gain more experience of the theatre, both by reading more plays and watching live productions, you will develop your ability to form clear mental pictures of the characters and action. You will even begin to fill your imaginary stage with suitable furnishings that create a location for the action in your mind; you will begin to envisage the costumes, lighting and sound effects.

Activity 1
With a partner, take any play off the shelf in your school library. Each of you read the opening two pages, note down your first thoughts about the setting, casting, and stage action, then share your “director” ideas.

Which play?
Your teacher will choose a play from the following list of possible set texts:
- Antigone by Sophocles
- Much Ado About Nothing by William Shakespeare
- The Servant of Two Masters by Carlo Goldoni
- Hedda Gabler by Henrik Ibsen
- The Caucasian Chalk Circle by Bertolt Brecht
- Accidental Death of an Anarchist by Dario Fo
- Jerusalem by Jez Butterworth

Although each of the set plays in Component 1 is distinct in terms of its style and original context, the demands that are placed on you as you work through the plays are very much the same, whether you are studying Antigone, the oldest play and a tragedy, or Jerusalem, the most modern of the set plays and an anarchic, dark comedy.

Rather than devote separate parts of this chapter to each of the set plays, after an initial introduction to the contexts, genre and style of each play, we are going to discuss approaches to interpretation that are common to all plays, using specific examples from each of the set texts to illustrate those approaches along the way.

Each play is flagged by a coloured symbol to help you find references to your chosen text more easily. However, please remember that all the points made will be relevant to you, whichever text you are studying. The examples from the plays that you are not studying are presented so as to be meaningful to all readers of this book.

Activity 2
Read some of the other set plays as well as the one you are studying. This will enhance your knowledge of drama and theatre as well as deepen your understanding of the process of interpretation. You might also find a play that you might like to explore for your text-based practical component.

Perspectives
Since questions that relate to this component invite you to give answers from the perspective of a director, an actor or a designer, it makes sense to give equal attention to issues of staging, performance and design. Chapters 3 to 8 are therefore divided up according to these three broad headings.

However, do remember that you need to understand how directors, designers and actors work together to achieve a complete theatrical realisation of a play for an audience. It is the result of this combined effort that the audience experiences when watching a production unfold in the theatre.

Key terms
Comedy: A form of drama which usually explores the absurdities of life and which usually ends happily generally with a reconciliation or marriage. The audience are expected to respond with laughter, recognising in the exaggerated actions and troubles of the characters onstage something familiar in their own lives.

Genre: This is determined by what type of play it is, for example, comedy or tragedy.

Key terms
Context: Includes when and where the play was written as well as when and where it is set.

Form: The play’s structure.

Stage directions: The playwright’s descriptions of characters, costumes and settings as well as indications of entrances and exits, and suggestions for the delivery of lines or of reactions to the unfolding events on stage.

Style: The performance style of the play.