
A LEVEL

Drama and Theatre

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Report on the Examination

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In this, the first year of examination of this new specification, moderators were pleased to report seeing some excellent work that had not only clearly stretched and challenged the students but also revealed excellent understanding of the possibilities of devised work. It was evident, in many cases, that students had taken great care in taking ownership of their work, researching the content thoroughly whilst considering exactly the impact they wanted to have on their audience and reflecting the work of their chosen practitioner in a precise and thoughtful way. The marking of the performance pieces was, in many cases, accurate and realistic and teachers had applied the criteria with care and understanding. This was a little less true for the Working Notebook element of this component where there was a tendency for the work in many of the notebooks to be over-credited.

Examples of good practice

Administration and recordings

Given the plethora of new documents teachers have had to deal with, it is creditable how many sent all the right paperwork with the right sample.

Moderators were pleased to note that many centres had completed the paperwork accurately and efficiently, which was encouraging. However, several centres did not complete all the forms or did not send everything that was required when submitting the work and moderators had to spend some time contacting centres to request the missing items.

Centres should be reminded that they need to submit (in addition to the Candidate Record Forms) for each student:

- A Statement of Dramatic Intentions
- Programme Notes

Ensuring all the required forms on this checklist are completed should help both teachers and moderators avoid the necessity for requests for additional paperwork being made to centres at a busy stage of the term.

Almost all centres submitted their marks on time using e-submissions and sent the moderation sample immediately afterwards.

Most teachers had clearly identified each group and organised the sample accordingly. This was particularly useful with the work from very large centres (i.e. over 20) where teachers had grouped the sample students' work according to their performance groups. They had also provided the marks for other students in the group even if the work was not part of the sample.

For the most part, the programme notes were clearly presented with student names, their numbers, role/s played and title of the piece they were in present.

Good practice included photographs of the students taken in costume and make up. This made it so much easier for the moderator to identify them in the recording of the performance.

Some centres chose to present the identification of students in a different file on the recording.

Most students announced themselves and their numbers clearly and loudly. Some included further indicators such as 'You can identify me because I have a red streak in my hair' or 'I am playing the wicked witch'.

Recordings were generally clear enough for the moderator to check the mark scheme had been applied correctly. Even in immersive pieces there was a realisation of the need for the camera operator to stick closely to the teacher who was assessing the work live. In these cases there had clearly been many rehearsals with the camera to determine the best 'journey' through the action.

Statement of Dramatic Intentions

The majority of students had completed statements that showed clear evidence of them having given consideration to the piece of work that they were about to undertake. These offered a good sense of the theatrical effects the students intended to create and of the audience experiences they were hoping to achieve. Those students who had written comprehensively about their intentions in this document invariably produced performances that were highly detailed and which exhibited a strong sensitivity to their chosen subject matter. Good statements also revealed an understanding of the working methods and aims of the specified practitioner.

A clear statement enabled the moderator to approach the marking of the Working Notebook and the viewing of the performance piece with both anticipation and an understanding of what they would expect.

Working Notebooks

The vast majority of Working Notebooks were presented in the 'written only' format and adhered to the word limits. The word limit did not prevent highly articulate students from making a myriad of points.

The best notebooks had used the bullet points on pages 27 and 28 in the Specification as sub-headings. This had the benefit of making sure students had addressed the tasks. In these notebooks the work was presented in two clear sections as outlined on pages 27 and 28. The amount of research into the context and/or background of the piece was, at times, most impressive.

One student wrote about the research they had done into the Grenfell fire, not only using newspaper reports and social media, but had also interviewed a lawyer working for one of the families and a relative of an affected family. In addition they had traveled down to London to look at the site for themselves. It was at this stage their piece changed radically from one which had been a memoriam to a highly politicised piece. One had the sense when reading this work that the student had been operating as a real theatre maker. The student was then able to link bits of research directly to the monologues and movement sequences they had developed.

Another feature of good work was the level of perceptive understanding of the selected practitioner. It was a delight to read about a student who had not only read Brecht's *Mann ist Mann* but had mimicked the structure in devising the piece and based their own characterisation on Galy Gay. Another student wrote about his excitement on having read the first 'Theatre of Cruelty' Manifesto and how their use of Native American costume and the decision to stage the piece in soil was directly linked to Artaud's ideas on ritual.

Some students had clearly seen a lot of live theatre and were able to identify precisely the ideas, methods and techniques they had themselves adopted.

When stating their and their group's dramatic aims, the best students avoided generalisation but were specific about their own role/s and their part in the piece as a whole. When writing about the group's aims they avoided clichés and explained in detail what they wanted the audience to think

and feel.

In section 2 the best notebooks revealed an understanding of how the students' approach to the task of devising replicated that of their chosen practitioner. Development and refinement was balanced between what the group did and what they did in order to create their role.

Frequently students playing a single character found it easier to write in depth about the deployment of physical and vocal skills.

Good working notebooks never lost touch with the practitioner.

When writing about final ideas and the comparison between initial ideas and the final product, students based their critique on their own thoughts rather than just stating what the audience had said afterwards.

An interesting approach was when students evaluated their own work in terms of whether their practitioner would have recognised the final piece as one of their own.

Teachers on the whole annotated the notebooks and wrote succinct comments on the mark sheets to support the marks awarded.

Some teachers used the whole mark scheme in a realistic assessment of their students.

Performances

There was generally an understanding of the time limits and groups adhered to these.

Often good pieces started with some opening music or SFX before the lights came up, thereby setting the scene for the audience.

In the best work everything on stage was consonant with the practitioner's methods and purpose.

One thrilling piece of *Complicite* about bootleggers before and after the Wall Street Crash saw the action move seamlessly from an office, to a speakeasy, to a train created by a costume rail of coats, to the dust bowl mid west created with a hand held smoke machine and pink lighting. The costumes were clearly of the period, including the shoes, and the action was supported by black and white newsreels projected onto the cyclorama. In addition the acting was clearly in the *Complicite* style with a very impressive array of New York and Chicago accents. What marked it out even further as a piece of *Complicite* was the intermittent clowning with political comment, drawing parallels between then and now. It made the moderator wish they had seen it live.

Another piece in the style of Artaud drew parallels between the Mad Hatter's Tea Party and the Boston Tea Party. The whole thing was a riot from beginning to end with its ritualistic costumes, war paint, resplendent lighting, rhythms beaten out and a decidedly freakish Cheshire cat, the group proved that Artaud's theatre could be an act of madness without the screaming.

There were some beautiful lyrical pieces inspired by *Frantic Assembly*. One about Syrian refugees intertwined with a love story that used a continuous musical underscore. A trucked rostra was the only set but was used to create multiple locations and effects in a highly imaginative way.

Another *Frantic* inspired piece looked at online grooming. This was performed with outstanding skills in a truly chilling way with most of the action taking place in 'cyber space'.

And finally good work was evident where:

- all visual elements had been considered with characters in appropriate costume
- pieces were well lit
- music was used judiciously
- no scene or sequence went on for too long or conversely each scene was well developed and not left hanging
- it was clear when the piece had finished
- the piece generally reached a climax/anti-climax/denouement
- students produced work that was genuinely laugh out loud funny
- the audience chosen was appropriate and supportive of the students' work
- there was a genuine sense of occasion and the work was presented as a final and valued performance.

Moderators identified the following administrative and technical issues:

Some materials were very poorly organised, this was particularly difficult in large centres where moderators had to hunt for individual students' Working Notebooks and match them to the CRF.

Poorly annotated work and/or negligible comments on CRF.

Recordings sent loose in the sack with no means of identification e.g. centre number and/or the name of the group piece.

Moderators identified several issues with the recording of the work, including:

- the camera being positioned:
 - behind the heads of the audience
 - out of focus
 - too far away to be able to see nuances of performers' expressions or to hear them properly.

Other issues with the recording of the work included:

- Poor lighting. Sometimes too dark, sometimes with flare on students' faces.
- Students out of shot so that their whole performance was not captured.
- Audience filmed coming into the performance space.
- Filming the pre-show which often meant the performance exceeded the maximum time limit.

There were also some problems with the identification of students on recording, including:

- no candidate numbers
- shot in extreme close up on face so one can't then identify in performance
- completely different appearance in identification, i.e. not in costume, different hairstyle
- not stating specialism.

Other issues included:

- Jumping/sticking recordings. It would be very helpful if recordings were on USB. The variety of formats on DVD had the potential to cause problems.
- Some centres sent more than one recording, each from a different angle in the hope that the moderator would watch all of them. This is not helpful to a moderator with numerous recordings to watch.
- Lost or corrupted work, in one case a moderator was asked to follow a YouTube link to watch a dress rehearsal.
- Programme notes that contained out of date pictures from school database

It would be good practice to film a dress rehearsal in order to check the recording for audibility, sight lines etc.

Moderators reported some use of non-examinees that contravened the rubric.

One centre with one student included written permission from their NEA to use a non-examinee and then used two. Where the work has been completed and subsequently a student has been withdrawn from the course, there should be a letter of explanation from the centre to this effect.

Centres should make sure they film the set or costume that the student has designed prior to the start of the piece

Statements of Dramatic Intention

In a few cases all students in particular groups had submitted identical Statements of Dramatic Intentions which is inappropriate as it is intended to be an individual task and not a group one. Centres should be aware that Statements of Dramatic Intention need to be specific, clear and achievable.

Some students offered lengthy, generalised, statements that were not achievable, or their intentions were not revealed in their performances.

Working Notebooks

It is important to stress here that the Working Notebook carries twice the marks of the performance and therefore centres are encouraged to adhere to the criteria in the specification when supporting students and marking the work.

Significant issues identified included:

- Working Notebooks not stapled or clipped together. Some were not submitted in the right order.
- A word count not being included.
- The notebook not being written in two sections, making judging how marks had been awarded very difficult.
- Where the work had been divided into two sections, but the teacher had credited points from the different sections across the whole notebook, this contravened the rubric.
- A lack of attention to the criteria on pages 27/28 of specification.
- Evidence of all groups in a centre being given the same stimulus leading to many notebooks containing the same initial ideas and rationale almost word for word.
- Evidence that final work deviated from the initial stimulus to such an extent that it wasn't actually what stimulated the final piece.
- Many students writing collectively as 'we' rather than singularly as 'I'.
- Insufficient linking of content to the practitioner or vice versa in the rationale.
- Very little reference to Live Theatre productions and how these have influenced the shaping and development of the work or simply irrelevant statements of what had been seen that bore no relation to their practitioner or content.
- Personal aims which were limited to generalised statements such as 'creating an engaging character' or 'using Frantic techniques'. Many had omitted to mention the group's dramatic intentions.
- Working Notebooks presented as scrapbooks or logs, mind maps and mood boards often with seemingly random photos tended to reveal very little coherent through line of process and these were often over marked by teachers.

- Where the student had selected the 'Written accompanied by annotated photographs' box, in many cases it appeared that this had been used as a method for getting above the 3000 word limit. Sadly many of these included not more than a few unannotated photos that appeared to have been used for decorative purposes only.
- In a few cases, notebooks written in the format of supporting notes from the previous specification.
- Downloaded material being presented as original.
- Over crediting by teachers.

Many notebooks were marked very highly and had to be adjusted fairly significantly by moderators because of a lack of specific detail and explanation of how the student had combined theory and practice.

Application of Practitioner

Some students wrote about two or more practitioners; thereby revealing a misunderstanding of the purpose of the working notebook.

In many cases, moderators detected very limited practitioner knowledge and understanding, there were frequent examples of 'cherry picking' one or two conventions and ignoring basic intentions, this was particularly egregious with Brecht. There was also a limited context for methodology selected, for example, from practitioners with a broad canon of work, e.g. Katie Mitchell or Frantic Assembly, who were frequently reduced to 'round by through' and 'chair duets'. Alecky Blythe was sometimes reduced to recording interviews only, revealing a misunderstanding about her techniques of editing to create dramatic effect.

In some cases students appeared to base all knowledge of a practitioner on a single production – particularly true of Frantic Assembly and 'Things I Know To Be True' leading to superficial treatment/application of methods.

Several students confused some theatre companies' performance methods with Brecht. For example Brecht's 'Slap and tickle' was regularly mentioned. There were regular references to Brecht as 'abstract'/'non naturalistic' that revealed a lack of understanding of his ideas on costume and props. There was often a lack of reference to gestic acting or actor as demonstrator when referring to Brecht's theories of acting; similarly for Artaud, no mention of affective athleticism or breathing.

There was also evidence of the inappropriate application of practitioners. Several groups showed very limited evidence of their chosen practitioner's methodologies. Sadly, it seemed that some students had failed to recognise that their choice of practitioner needed to help them to convey their chosen aims and intentions.

Performances

There were some performance pieces with no discernible practitioner influence, for example DV8 with no movement or a collection of apparent random techniques, for example, a Mike Leigh piece where all the performers dressed in black, directly addressed the audience, mimed props and used a chair duet.

In many Brechtian inspired pieces, moderators reported seeing a great deal of work that revealed a serious lack of understanding of Brecht's own techniques, where it was very apparent that the students had clearly only seen or read work by Theatre in Education companies who purport to use

his techniques. Elements of the v-effekt were therefore reduced to random 'placards', a complete misunderstanding of Spass (interpreted as anything comical no matter how inappropriate or misplaced), or a set comprised of two school chairs with no evidence of costume.

There were some incidents where all performers wore black leggings and t-shirts contrary to the practitioner's methods. e.g. Artaud and his desire for 'resplendent costumes'.

Stanislavski was a popular choice however, although the acting style may have been appropriate, no thought had been given to costume, and props etc. or groups had mixed mimed and real props in the same piece.

Some groups attempted Frantic Assembly with extremely limited physical ability or where one or two students demonstrated limited abilities which, therefore, became restrictive for other group members. There were also pieces with students performing in such a way that would be anathema to the practitioner e.g. Frantic Assembly with bare feet and performers as inanimate objects.

There were many examples of pieces that were little more than a series of linked monologues demonstrating a lack of theatrical awareness.

There were some pieces which consisted solely of direct address, usually performed downstage centre and consisting of haranguing the audience with a set of statistics.

There were a disappointing number of instances where candidates were trying to use TV and filmic techniques in their construction, for example the game show format, reporting 'to camera' etc. This could be linked to the lack of exposure to Live Theatre; many digital theatre recordings still use filmic techniques and this might be unduly influencing students.

In Artaudian pieces, the candidates' 'interference/interaction' with the audience often revealed just how un-shocking the performers' work really is, the camera often highlights the audiences' embarrassment for the performers and their own embarrassment at being filmed with a performer sitting on their lap and/or licking their faces. There was evidence of some 'Artaudian' work which exploits the vulnerabilities of the young performers with unacceptable levels of semi-nudity and often inappropriate subject matter including rape and/or other sexual abuse.

In relation to the marking of the performance moderators reported many instances of teachers over crediting:

- consonance with practitioner, this was often the case where the student had 'cherry picked' ideas and failed to produce a piece wholly in the style of the practitioner
- 'originality' where candidates had relied on techniques such as linked monologues or poor examples of 'naturalism'
- skill marks where every member of the group was given exactly the same marks regardless of differing achievement evident
- 'success in realising artistic intentions' by awarding marks for process/ rehearsals rather than the performances themselves.

Although moderators recognise and sympathise with the restrictions centres face, the work should be of performance standard and this should be reflected in the presentation of the performance space and have a sense of occasion. There were many pieces where the group had not taken possession of their space with stacked chairs, bags and old bits of scenery clearly in view, or where blackout curtains were not properly closed. At times there was a lack of attention given to visual elements in general. Some centres appear to have completed and filmed this component very early in the course often resulting in somewhat naïve or less skillful work

Specialisms

Directors should provide evidence of what they have actually done. The working notebook format of 20 pages 'written plus diagrams' allows them to supply extracts from their prompt copy, rehearsal schedules, blocking diagrams, props lists, rehearsal notes, draft bits of script. They should be using the first person when writing and using the same rehearsal methods as the practitioner and should have an overall vision for the piece.

Similarly lighting and sound designers should provide cue sheets or plots. The notebook is an ideal vehicle for showing off what they have designed.

Moderators reported seeing examples of designers who did little more than offer an assembly of stock items from the school's wardrobe or props cupboards or a simple costume design that suggested very little time had gone into its production or sets that were comprised of little more than a few school chairs with an old blanket on top.

Students should be reminded to look closely at the requirements for each specialism as outlined in the specification on pages 16-19 and 26-27.

There were many examples of actors not acting in the style of the chosen practitioner, true for almost all practitioners: Brecht, Berkoff, DV8, Complicite and Frantic Assembly.

Moderators identified a lack of vocal variety with lots of shouting out front, or far too quiet, or poor articulation with lots of mumbling.

In all but the most secure, multi role-playing revealed no differentiation between roles. There were often clumsy costume changes or poor handling of props (where they were used).

In some cases students chose to set a piece clearly in another country e.g. USA in a verbatim piece but no attempt had been made to adopt an appropriate accent. This is unlikely to contribute to the success of the piece.

Many of the above could be rectified by closer study of the specification and through perusal of the TOLS and supporting materials available.

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](#)