

# Session 6: Style

## The medium is the message

### Creating meaning through style

#### Naturalism

#### Expressionism

#### Absurdism

## Key Concepts

### Style As Substance

Certain historical eras have given rise to specific theatrical forms and styles, such as the agitprop theatre of post-revolutionary Soviet Russia, which attempted to promote Communist ideals, and, in the 1930s and '40s, the extreme left-wing writings of Bertolt Brecht.

*'We need a type of theatre which not only releases the feelings, insights and impulses possible within the particular historical field of human relations in which the action takes place, but employs and encourages those thoughts and feelings which help transform the field itself.'* Bertolt Brecht

Fifty years later in the 1970s and '80s Britain, a new wave of political plays emerged by writers such as David Hare, Howard Barker and Caryl Churchill. They intended their plays to broadcast strong political messages about the decay of socialist values and the inherent problems they believed this caused in society. A decade later writers such as Sarah Kane, Anthony Neilsen and Mark Ravenhill wrote provocative and confrontational plays about modern Britain which became part of what was known as the In Yer Face theatre movement. In each case, the style and form of the plays was a vital part of how the writers communicated their message.

*'The theatre is the best way of showing the gap between what is said and what is seen to be done, and that is why, ragged and gap-toothed as it is, it has still a far healthier potential than some poorer, abandoned arts.'* David Hare

In order to understand the choices available to playwrights about form and style, and how they might be used to create a political, cultural or social viewpoint, here are three key movements in 20th- and 21st-century western theatre.

### Naturalism

Originating in the late 19th century, naturalistic theatre attempts to transpose reality on to the stage by creating a recognisable, three-dimensional theatrical world. The form relies on the use of detailed life-like sets and dialogue, along with a style of acting that aims to mimic real-life behaviour.

Naturalist plays attempt to present an objective view of society, showing the warts and all. Naturalism is still the predominant style in British theatre and television. Key playwrights: Anton Chekhov, Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg

*'Everything on stage should be as complex and simple as in real life.'* Anton Chekhov.

### Expressionism

The Expressionist movement originated in Germany in the early 20th century as a direct reaction to Naturalism, and rejected the idea that plays must be recognisably realistic. Instead it aimed to shock the audience with the use of jarring and violent imagery, poetic speech patterns, mythic archetypes and stripped-down, non-naturalistic sets. Key playwrights: Georg Kaiser and Ernst Toller

*"I don't want realism, I want magic! I try to give that to people. I misrepresent things to them. I don't tell the truth, I tell what ought to be truth."* Blanche DuBois, in *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams.

### Absurdism

With its roots in French post-war Existentialist philosophy, the Theatre of the Absurd explores the idea that human life is ultimately without purpose. It mixes tragedy with broad comedy about hopeless characters who are often trapped in a nightmarish world. Absurdist plays may feature circular or non-existent plots, repetitive and illogical actions, and heightened or nonsensical dialogue. Perhaps the most famous absurdist play of all time is Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, in which two characters wait for a third person who never arrives.

Key playwrights: Eugene Ionesco, Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter

*'Art has nothing to do with clarity, does not dabble in*

## Discuss This



**Style is substance. HOW a playwright says something is just as important as WHAT s/he says.**

**How might you use form and style to create meaning in your play? Does your subject matter lend itself to a particular form or style?**

# Group Exercise



- Listen to these three pieces of music in turn.
- As you listen, write down some of the thoughts, feelings and images the music evokes in you.
- Try to describe how the style of the music functions to produce your emotional and intellectual responses. This might include lyrics, tone, mood, tempo, etc.



1. **'Sheep May Safely Graze' by J S Bach-**  
<http://bit.ly/16zWteB>

2. **'Ill Manors' by Plan B**

<http://bit.ly/wifm7N>

3. **'A Change Is Gonna Come' by Aretha Franklin**

<http://bit.ly/18MosYV>

Afterwards compare and discuss your responses to these three very different musical styles with the group.

**In theatre, just as in music, meaning is not just created through the dialogue spoken by actors on stage, but also by theatrical style and dramatic form. This might include storytelling devices, set design, lighting and music, and styles of acting and direction. All these elements will combine to create a particular relationship between the audience and the performance.**



- Now listen to the three audio clips on the STYLE session page and read along with the text.

- List any **STYLISTIC CONVENTIONS** you can identify in what's written.

This could include descriptions of action, style of dialogue, details of set or costume, scene structure... anything that creates a theatrical effect.

## Discuss This



Listen to the audio clips from the plays listed below

How do you relate to each style of writing? Which did you prefer? How does each scene make you feel?

Does the style of the play contribute to your understanding of its content and themes? Can you imagine it staged in a different way?

Do you think there is a good fit between the subject matter and the style?

In what way do you think this scene could be said to be political? What issues does it explore? Do you think the writer has found the best form and style in the play to explore her subject matter?

### ***Journey To X***

by Nancy Harris

A group of young people are on a mission to get to London for the open audition of the world's most popular talent show, before it's too late. They have to find a name for their group, an outfit that doesn't make them look ridiculous, some fake ID and a way to pay for their flights without alerting their parents. They also have to find five hundred quid and fast... because their journey for fame and fortune is really a journey for something far less glamorous. Something their country doesn't approve of, something their parents wouldn't condone. It's a decision only one of them can make, whether she wants to or not.

### ***Re-Write***

by Tosin Omosebi

In a secure psychiatric unit, two young men charged with murder are undergoing evaluation by a doctor who is determined to understand the strange relationship between the arrogant and privileged Kingsley and the vulnerable Tommy, a victim of violence, displacement and endless fostering. As Tommy's grip on reality starts to loosen, he becomes aware that he is in a play and that we, the audience, are watching his trials and tribulations from the comfort of our seats. Will he recover from his hallucinatory insights, or will his doctor succeed in 'rewriting' him to his own specifications? *Re-Write* won the New Views playwriting competition in 2012 and was staged at the National Theatre and at Westminster Hall.

### ***Gargantua***

by Carl Grose

Set in the fictional town of Skankton Marsh, a young couple, Mini and Marcus Mungus, are nervously awaiting their new arrival. Rushed to hospital Mini, miraculously gives birth to a child the size of an adult human, which grows to be the size of a house and eventually ends up being 200ft tall. But when a gaggle of sinister military scientists intent on cloning an army of giant babies extract Little Hugh's DNA, he breaks his chains and escapes. Carl Grose's play is based on the 16th-century novel *The Life of Gargantua and of Pantagruel* by Francois Rabelais, and uses those mythical characters to explore the theme of consumer excess.

## Tips

### When You Start Writing Your Own Play...

It will be useful, when you are thinking about your own play, to ask yourself what you want to achieve with its form and style, and which might be the best way to achieve this.

For example, do you want your play to:

- Reflect reality as you perceive it, and create a believable authentic world for your audience?
- Use metaphor and symbolism to convey a message, and use theatrical effects to shock an audience out of their complacency?
- Show people the absurdity of a situation or event, and use humour or satire to put your point across?

## Get Writing



Look at this scene and read aloud using volunteers from the group.

**Journey To X** by Nancy Harris (2012)

In this scene, a young girl and her ex boyfriend meet for the first time since he learned she has become pregnant, in order to discuss their options and choices within a society where abortion is illegal.

### Use this scene to start off your own writing:

1. On your own, write a paragraph describing the basic action of the scene – what happens, where, why and to whom.
2. Everyone shares their paragraph with the group. Refine the paragraph based on everyone's different ideas, until everybody agrees on the basic action.
3. Choose a specific style you would like to work with, in this case either EXPRESSIONISM or ABSURDISM. Think about how you can portray the basic action of the scene in a new way, using a different style of writing. You can reference the earlier scenes you looked at from *Re-Write* and *Gargantua* for ideas.

Also think about the three songs you heard at the beginning of the session, and how their individual styles aroused different responses in you. What audience response are you aiming for with your new scene – e.g. provocation, reassurance, empathy – and how can you use theatrical form to establish this, alongside the actual lines spoken?

## Tips

- Try to see how you can use stylistic conventions to change the meaning of the basic action. This will help you think about the relationship between form and content.
- Think about the overall effect you want the scene to have on your audience. e.g. Do you want to make them laugh, disturb them, convince them about an idea or point of view?
- Be as imaginative as possible in TRANSPOSING the action (moving it to another time/ location/ etc) and see how far you can push the conventions of the style you choose.



### Find Out More

Info on *Journey to X*  
<http://bit.ly/1nxLOHR>

Info on *Rewrite*  
<http://bit.ly/14ZVvED>

Info on *Gargantua*  
<http://bit.ly/UuBJMW>  
<http://bit.ly/Rhz1vM>

Article on expressionism  
<http://bit.ly/Rhz3Ug>

### Suggestions For Further Reading

#### Naturalism

*Three Sisters, The Seagull, The Cherry Orchard* by Anton Chekhov

*A Doll's House, Hedda Gabler* by Henrik Ibsen

*Miss Julie* by August Strindberg

*Look Back in Anger* by John Osborne

#### Expressionism

*The Emperor Jones and The Hairy Ape* by Eugene O'Neill

*Angels in America* by Tony Kushner

*Stoning Mary* by debbie tucker green

*A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams

*Attempts on Her Life* by Martin Crimp

#### Absurdism

*Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett

*The Chairs and Rhinoceros* by Eugene Ionesco

*The Caretaker and The Birthday Party* by Harold Pinter

*Blue Kettle* by Caryl Churchill

*The Walworth Farce* by Enda Walsh

*Realism* by Antony Neilsen

# Extension Exercise



## Theatricality/Metaphorical Life on Stage

Before you might want to commit to a particular style or form for your play, it's worth thinking more generally about how writers craft a theatrical experience for their audience – that is, inviting us to move beyond the boundaries of realism that we generally expect from television and film. For example, you may want to create a visual metaphor in your play to underpin its ideas and themes. Props, stage settings, music and costume can all help achieve this.

(Plays like *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams contain many examples of theatrical metaphors.)



Watch these two short films about Tanya Ronder's play *Table*

<http://bit.ly/19zUAjh>

<http://bit.ly/14mykIU>

## **Table** by Tanya Ronder

Produced at the National Theatre in 2013

Telling the story of one family over 200 years, *Table* is a collaborative exploration of belonging, identity and the things we pass on. Six generations, nine performers, thirty parts and one very special piece of furniture.

## Exercise

Discuss Tanya Ronder's use of a table as her central prop, and how it carries metaphorical meaning in the play. Can you come up with your own key prop that might create a starting point for a play? Brainstorm some ideas with the group – these might include objects, settings and places (real or imagined.) Once you have a list, choose one and think about what sort of symbolic meaning it carries. Then see if you can flesh out a basic story idea, using the prop as your guiding theme.