

Key Concepts

Political Theatre

- A play with a political or social message.
- A play that takes a political stance on an issue.
- A play that encourages social debate around an issue relevant to a particular society.

Power

Inherent in the idea of political theatre is the concept of power. e.g. The struggle for power between different individuals, groups or societies. The use of power by people or organizations to achieve a political goal.

Rhetoric

One of the key tools in the struggle for power is rhetoric – the art of persuasion. We see rhetoric being used every day in speeches by politicians, appeals in advertising campaigns, articles by journalists, as well as in ordinary conversations.



Playwrights on writing political plays

Now watch the interviews with playwrights discussing their responses to the provocation. Afterwards share your thoughts about them with the group.
<http://bit.ly/1ARjPLi>

Discuss This

What is politics?

In what ways do you consider yourself to be a political person?

Where do you get your information about politics?

(e.g. news reporting on television/newspapers/online; films and books; sharing opinions with friends and relatives; membership of social organizations or groups, etc.)

How can writing, and playwriting in particular, be considered a political act?



Do political plays have to be specifically about 'politics'?

Listen to the audio clips of a scene from *The Effect* by Lucy Prebble and a scene from *Welcome to Thebes* by Moira Buffini.



Discuss this

What's happening in each of these plays?

Which do you think is the most political play?

What do you think makes either scene or play political?

What are the issues being debated in each play?

What did you enjoy most and why?

Some critics and writers believe that theatre has greater political potential than other forms of fictional narrative, such as films and novels. Why and how might this be?

The director Dominic Dromgoole says that in the theatre, 'The air that vibrates between actors and the audience is full of the dust of the moment.' What do you think he means?



The Effect by Lucy Prebble

Premiered at the National Theatre in 2012, the play is set in a medical facility, which is testing a new anti-depressant drug for a pharmaceutical company. Among the volunteers being paid to be monitored under clinical trials are Connie, a psychology student, and Tristan, an unemployed drifter. As the doctors increase their drug dosage, Connie and Tristan find themselves falling in love. But is this love real and authentic, or merely an 'effect' of the mood-enhancing drugs they are taking? As their feelings for each other deepen, the couple attempts to outwit the doctors and the pharmaceutical company by taking matters into their own hands, with disastrous results. The play explores questions of sanity, neurology and the limits of medicine, as well as the power struggle between the individual, medical institutions and commercial drugs companies.



Welcome to Thebes by Moira Buffini

Produced by the National Theatre in 2010 and loosely based on Sophocles' classic tragedy *Antigone*. Set in a contemporary, unnamed African republic destroyed by civil war, the play explores the fragile diplomatic relationship between Eurydice, the new female president of war-torn Thebes, and Theseus, the arrogant ruler of rich and powerful Athens, who has come to offer aid. When Eurydice refuses to sanction the burial of the defeated warlord, Polynices, her action divides political opinion, and the resulting conflict causes fresh violence to explode. The future of Thebes thus hangs in the balance. Moira Buffini's play looks at the ways in which wealth, class and gender divisions impact democracy, and at the power games operating within modern politics.

Group Exercise



Read the scene straight through once or twice using volunteers from the group to read the different roles.



Afterwards **DISCUSS THIS**:

- Why do you think Toby, the head of the medical facility, might be excited about the information Dr James reveals here about the drug test results of the two volunteers? What might the implications be for him personally and politically?
- What techniques, skills or tactics does Toby use to try and convince Dr James that it's the drug causing these effects in the volunteers, rather than their own flirtation?
- What techniques, skills or tactics does Dr James use to defend her argument that it isn't the drug causing the effects?
- What skill is the playwright using here to present the argument of the scene? How do you think she wants the audience to respond to either character's argument?
- How could this scene, or the play in general, be seen as political?

Get Writing

1. Here is a list of characters who have a particular point they wish to make in service of a specific goal.

An MP making a political address to constituents

A celebrity making a charity appeal

A barrister delivering a speech in court in defence of his/her client

A policeman/woman asking a criminal to give evidence about a friend

Choose the character from the list who interests you the most.

(OR invent your own character.)

They will be Character A.

2. Now invent a second character, Character B. They can be anyone

you want, but they should fundamentally oppose Character A's main argument. Both Characters A and B want to convince a third party to agree with them. (This third party could be a group, such as the public, or a jury, OR an individual.)

3. Make a list of tactics, tricks, skills or methods your characters might use to create good rhetoric in a speech. You can model these on some of the same devices used in the scene from *The Effect*.

4. Write two speeches, one by Character A and one by Character B, in which they use their powers of persuasion to influence the third

party. Try to use logos, pathos and ethos as tools to help you create a convincing speech.

5. One of the challenges of using political rhetoric in a play is how to make it theatrical, rather than literary. Long speeches can impart useful information to an audience, but can also be rather dull to watch. Choose one of the speeches you've written, and then think about how you might bring this alive on stage. E.g. Could you use more than one character to present the information in dialogue rather than monologue? How might you make the speech more dynamic or visually dramatic?

Tips

When you're writing your play, think about not just what your character says but how they say it. Also try to be clear about what outcome your character is aiming for in their speech, whether or not they achieve it. When you're writing your play, think about the tactics characters use to get what they want.



Find Out More

Interview with David Harewood in the *Guardian* feature Portrait of the Artist <http://bit.ly/UQvm9L>.

David Harewood in *New Black Magazine* <http://bit.ly/PVQTL9> and *Metro* <http://bit.ly/SPK4tc>.

Alexia Khadime on *whatsonstage.com* <http://bit.ly/16hRjk5>.

Nikki Amuka-Bird on *Telegraph*, <http://bit.ly/SjdShf> and *Afridiziak* <http://bit.ly/dmSJWd>.

Richard Eyre in *The Daily Telegraph* <http://bit.ly/RUMqwi> and *Evening Standard* <http://bit.ly/QCoSqS>.

Madeline Appiah in *Afridiziak* <http://bit.ly/SvAO2p>.

Article about the black actor boom in *Evening Standard* <http://bit.ly/NP0Trp>.

Article about *Welcome to Thebes* in the *New Black Magazine* <http://bit.ly/OSf408>.

Interviews with the writer and director of *The Effect* along with comments by actors and specialists within the professional fields explored in the play <http://bit.ly/1uSb3w2>

The History of *Othello* at the National Theatre <http://bit.ly/1lfbEoA>

Suggestions For Further Reading

The Permanent Way by David Hare

Elmina's Kitchen by Kwame Kwei Armah

Pentecost by David Edgar

Power by Nick Dear

The Clink by Stephen Jeffreys

Posh by Laura Wade

Blue/Orange by Joe Penhall

The Crucible by Arthur Miller