



Session 2 People

Dramatic Action

Character Is Action

Character

Key Concepts

Character

Plays are dramatic constructions about people, watched by people, and so are always at heart about the nature of human behaviour – what people do, and why. One of the most important questions for the playwright is, ‘who is my play about?’

Three Major Elements of Character

Physiological Gender, age, ethnicity/race, sexuality, any significant or defining physical characteristics.

Sociological Nationality, job, class, education, social background, marital status, social values, etc.

Psychological Character traits, habits, disposition, personality traits, etc.

Character Is Action

The word ‘drama’ comes from the Ancient Greek verb ‘to do.’ Therefore drama implies action. This is a useful concept for thinking about how a good dramatic character might be constructed.

Dramatic Action

A dramatic action is an act or deed with significant consequences for an individual or group. If we want audiences to invest in our characters for the length of a play, we need to give them things to do that we can see affecting themselves and others. One of the playwright’s great challenges is finding characters who matter, not only to the writer but to an audience.

We can find lots of real life characters whose actions have had significant consequences for their society and beyond. We can also see why many playwrights, from the Greeks through Shakespeare and beyond, have drawn inspiration for their work from significant public figures.

Group Exercise



Watch the video news clip about Ipswich serial killer Steve Wright <http://bitly.ws/9GPw>



Afterwards, listen to the audio clip from *London Road* (2011), book and lyrics by Alecky Blythe, music and lyrics by Adam Cork. You can also read the scene but we advise listening straight through once or twice to the audio clip before you read the transcription.

London Road documents the true events of 2006, when the quiet rural town of Ipswich was shattered by the discovery of the bodies of five women. The residents of London Road had struggled for years with frequent soliciting and kerb-crawling on their street. When Steve Wright, the occupant of No. 79, was arrested, charged and then convicted of the murders, the community grappled with what it meant to be at the epicentre of this tragedy. Adam Cork’s music uses the melodic speech patterns captured on Alecky Blythe’s recorded interviews with the people of Ipswich to create this piece of verbatim theatre.

Discuss This

Impact

Did you find the play or the news clip more interesting or affecting? Why? What feelings does each clip arouse in you, and how are they different? How does the musical element of the play contribute to the overall impact of the story? Do you find the play’s form provocative in any way? What might contribute to a political debate around prostitution, social deprivation, or community relations?

Ethics

What do you think of Alecky Blythe’s choice to dramatize the verbatim testimony of real people as musical theatre? Do you feel it is an appropriate form for the subject matter? If not, how would you go about taking the facts and transforming them into a dramatic story? What are the ethical concerns of a writer inventing, changing or censoring real life or historical events to create a convincing dramatic narrative?

Structure

Do you think there is a straightforward antagonist/protagonist relationship in this play? If not, what might be the challenges of using an ensemble cast to tell a story? In the play, are there clear dramatic stakes and consequences for the characters you’ve heard speaking? What sort of journey might they go on in the play?

Discuss This

Playwrights On Character



Watch this short film where playwrights discuss creating characters. <https://youtu.be/fGRyP3p-YPI>. Now watch this short film where verbatim playwright and London Road creator Alecky Blythe talks about how she creates a play, collecting testimonies from real people. <https://youtu.be/u21hmi7O6xE> Afterwards, discuss whether you agree with the following statement: 'The playwright's job is to create stories, not documentaries. Drama must be more than just 'real life' put on stage.'

- What makes a character ('real' or imaginary) worthy of being in a play?
- What do you think are the challenges in creating a play around a real person or event?
- Is there a real person or event you are interested in writing about?
- Why do you find them dramatically interesting?
- What are the moral or ethical implications of dramatising real-life people or events?

Get Writing

- Choose a real historical figure from any time period who interests you personally. Useful people to choose from might be those with a significant political or historical role, such as a king, queen or sovereign head, a military leader, statesman, scientist, dissident, philosopher, writer, composer, sportsperson, etc. He/she will be the subject of today's creative exercise.
- Write down a list of characteristics for your chosen historical figure. Try to keep these as factual as possible. You may be able to invent some characteristics, but definitely not all e.g. if you're writing about the Queen, you could decide that you want her to have a fear of spiders (she might just have kept it secret), but you won't get away with giving her a French accent!
- Think about what the character values the most, what they want or need (goal), how they will go about getting it (action), and what might stand in their way (obstacle.) This can be one that you know your character had in real life or one you have imagined, from a moment in their lives that has gone unrecorded by history. Identifying a character's goal, action and obstacle will help create a narrative journey for your character. Also think about what the dramatic stakes are for the character in the story.
- Now invent a second character. (They can also be from 'real life' or they can be imaginary.)
- Outline a story that springs from their encounter. It could take place over an hour, a day, a week, a year, or a lifetime. Think about the circumstances of their meeting, and then about its potential consequences.

Name

Relationship To First Character

Physiological

Sociological

Psychological

Tips

Think about not only what your main character's goal is, but who else stands to gain or lose something if they achieve it? What are the consequences if they don't get what they want? Finally, ask yourself why an audience should invest emotionally in your characters.

Goal

Obstacle

Action

Stakes

Extension Exercise 1

Read the following biography about Martin Luther King, the American Civil Rights activist <http://bitly.ws/9GPz>

Now watch the following YouTube clip showing excerpts from Katori Hall's play *The Mountaintop* (Bernard B. Jacobs Theatre, New York, 2011) <http://bit.ly/2gp5VNs>

From the performance excerpts shown, make a list of the key choices that the playwright has made in telling her story for the stage.

eg. How many characters does the play feature? What is the setting? What sort of timeframe do you think the play has? At what period in Martin Luther King's actual life do you think this fictional story takes place?

Why do you think she made these choices? What is the interplay between the character's real life and the playwright's fictional inventions? And how has the writer created dramatic stakes in her play?

Now read the following reviews and interviews to learn more about the writer Katori Hall's journey in turning real life events into drama.



<http://bitly.ws/show/9GPD>

<http://bit.ly/2wtQFGC>

Extension Exercise 2

When writing a play about a real historical figure, it's important to think about the theatrical world in which you want to situate them. Researching the specific era they were from can help you imagine the daily life of the person and the cultural, sociological and physical world they inhabited. e.g. what food did they eat, what clothes did they wear, what were the social mores and habits of their time? However, theatre also has the potential to bend the rules of history to dramatic effect. For example, Caryl Churchill's seminal feminist play *Top Girls* brings together a variety of famous women from history, including Pope Joan, Chaucer's Griselda and Victorian traveller Isabella Bird for a dinner party at which they eat, drink and discuss the various sacrifices they had to make to succeed.

More recently, Moira Buffini's 2014 play *Handbagged* speculates on what Margaret Thatcher and the Queen might have talked about in their state meetings, and imagines their genteel battle for status and authority.

Choose two or more historical characters that you would be interested to bring together in a play. They might include characters from drama or literature as well as famous real life historical figures.

Think about the following questions

What themes, issues or ideas might you be able to explore with this pairing? Where would you set the play and why?

Is there a famous historical event around which the play is centred?

e.g. *The Mountaintop* takes place the night before Martin Luther King's assassination.

How do the past and present combine thematically? What meaning might this juxtaposition have for a modern audience?

Suggestions For Further Reading

Poetics by Aristotle

Breakfast with Mugabe by Fraser Grace

The Girlfriend Experience and *London Road* by Alecky Blythe

My Name is Rachel Corrie edited by Alan Rickman and Katherine Viner

The Life of Galileo by Bertolt Brecht

Insignificance by Terry Johnson

Bringing Up Baby by Dennis Kelly

Interesting Characters by Charlene James

Cuttin' It by Charlene James

Blood by Emteaz Hussain

Home created by Nadia Fall

Chewing Gum Dreams by Michaela Coel

Red Velvet by Lolita Chakrabarti

Behind the Beautiful Forevers by David Hare, based on the book by Katharine Boo

Broad Shadow by Molly O'Gorman (winning play New Views 2016)

The Barbershop Chronicles by Inua Ellams

Our Ladies of Perpetual Succour by Lee Hall