



Session 6 Style

The medium is the message

Creating meaning through style

Naturalism

Expressionism

Absurdism

Key Concepts

Style As Substance

As in all art forms, theatre writing has gone through many different evolutions throughout history in response to cultural and social changes. Modern theatre as we know it experienced a seismic shift with the development of 19th century Naturalism. Its proponents, including Chekhov and Ibsen, sought to create recognizable, three-dimensional theatrical worlds by using detailed life-like sets and dialogue, and, crucially, a style of acting that aimed to mimic real-life behaviour. This rejected previous dominant theatrical conventions contained in popular forms like farce, melodrama and classical romance and tragedy, which were not interested in reflecting the reality of ordinary people, but in providing broadly entertaining theatrical spectacles. Naturalism was influenced by social and political upheavals of the time such as Darwinism, the rise of scientific logic, technological innovation and industrialization. The world was changing in huge ways, and theatre, as a popular art form, changed too.

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

Drama as a window on the world

Although Naturalism has continued to dominate British theatre and television, there are several significant 20th century movements in the theatre that reflecting social evolution. Some examples are

- 1920-30s Brecht's epic theatre, which aimed to promote socialist ideals in the face of rising Fascism.
- 1950s the Absurdist plays of Ionesco, Beckett and Pinter, which mix tragedy with broad comedy in depicting hopeless characters who are often trapped in a nightmarish world.
- 1970s-80s The political plays by writers such as David Hare, Howard Barker and Caryl Churchill, which explored the decay of socialist values and the social problems they believed this created.
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- 1990s; the 'In Yer Face' theatre movement which included writers like Sarah Kane, Antony Nielsen and Mark Ravenhill, writing provocative and confrontational plays about modern Britain.

In each case, the style and form of the plays is a vital part of how the writers communicate their meaning.

'Once you have perceived that life is very cruel, the only response is to live with as much humanity, humour and freedom as you can.' From *Blasted*, Sarah Kane

Theatrical form and devices

All these writers, and many more, have used different theatrical forms and devices to help tell their stories and create a particular kind of theatrical experience for their audiences. Some key devices include

- Staging and setting; e.g. use of theatrical space in realistic or non-realistic ways; use of props, lighting, costumes and sound to create realism, metaphor or heightened reality on stage.
- Time and place e.g. non-literal shifts in location and timescale; use of memory, flashback, jumps in time; parallel or counterpoint timeframes
- Dialogue e.g. direct address to audience; monologue; use of narrators; heightened lyrical dialogue or use of specific vernacular/slang to reflect a particular social/geographical/cultural world or reality.
- Use of non-literal characters alongside 'real' ones; e.g. ghosts, manifestations of a character's imagination or consciousness.

Playwrights also deliberately choose to write with different tonal qualities of comedy, pathos, irony, satire, tragedy, and so on. What you write and how you write it is up to you, but try to think about the world you want to create, the reality of the characters you want to depict, the atmosphere and tone of the piece you want to convey, and the response you want to create in your audience when making stylistic and formal choices.

'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.

Discuss This



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

Watch this short film where playwright discuss how they find they marry form and content <https://youtu.be/HFS0MNJepCA>. Now think about your own writing. What social, political or cultural upheavals are happening in the world around you right now? How do these impact your life? How might you show your experience of the world, or your characters' experiences, in your play?

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? What sorts of theatrical devices might help you tell your story, and why?

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://bitly.ws/9GQd>

2. 'Ill Manors' by Plan B <http://bitly.ws/9GQe>

3. 'A Change Is Gonna Come' by Aretha Franklin <http://bitly.ws/9GQg>

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?

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 Omosibi

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 theatrical device from the list on page 72 that you would like to work with. Think about how you can portray the basic action of the scene in a new way, using this device and/or 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 and theatrical devices 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://bitly.ws/9GQj>

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
Ear for Eye by Debbie Tucker Green
Seven Methods of Killing Kylie Jenner by Jasmine Lee Jones
Fairview by Jackie Sibblies Drury