

GCSE

Drama

42401 Written Paper
Report on the Examination

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General Comments

It is pleasing to report the high quality of responses submitted by a growing number of well-prepared students, who were awarded high marks where there was evidence of enthusiastic personal engagement with their drama course. The range of dramatic material in responses was most impressive, indicating really healthy and vibrant performance work within many centres reflected in Sections A and B. There were also excellent evaluative skills demonstrated in Section C. Occasionally student's enthusiasm for their Section A performance led to poor timing in the exam room, leaving insufficient time to do justice to their accompanying Section B or C response. If they fail to attempt the final question due to time management issues they will lose a quarter of the available marks for the paper so students need to be primed accordingly in advance of the exam.

The Report on the Examination for all previous series has included advice on preparing students for this written exam and sadly there is still a significant minority of teachers who continue to disadvantage their best students by drilling them with prepared responses, often most suitable for questions asked in previous series of the exam, while compromising their opportunity to focus on this year's question. A top band response is defined by how 'purposefully' material is marshalled to answer the question asked and a response that misses the required focus, no matter how articulate and detailed, is likely to be considered 'useful', the definition of a second band response. Again this year full cohorts of students were coached with the same extract, often the same character and using the same quotations, research material and theory 'buzz' words.

Examiners are instructed to address each paper individually, but students' enthusiasm can be compromised by over-prescriptive preparation and a consequence can be a bunching of centre's marks, the strongest students in the cohort constrained by a general centre-approved approach to both character and scene. Undoubtedly the most successful approach to both Sections A and B is for students to focus on a piece of their own Controlled Assessment work, for which they will have received feedback in the form of an awarded practical mark and from any audience present. Any centre adopting this approach will have a range of characters and plays represented in their cohort, rather than the narrow focus of dozens of students all playing Angela or Donald in the Barn scene of *'Blue Remembered Hills'* or the tedium of in excess of two dozen performances of the opening to *'Teachers'*, with more than one centre having that number playing Salty, each of them apparently to hearty audience response.

Section A

Examiners reported fewer students switching skills between questions, and less reference to inappropriate 'skills' of choreographer or director, though a minority still failed to focus on actor **or** designer **or** technician. The specification is very clear that this exam requires a personal response and, unless specifically requested otherwise in the questions asked, the word 'you' should be regarded as singular not plural and the focal point should always be the student's own preparation and performance work, rather than their group's endeavours. Examiners are instructed to mark positively so any perceived ambivalence in the wording of the questions asked is sensitively considered before a mark is awarded but the default position for students should be to answer these questions from their own unique perspective.

Question 01

Most centres have a complete understanding of the requirements for success at answering this question with a very small minority still harbouring some misapprehensions and they are referred to last year's report wherein there is a lengthy explanation of these requirements. The component parts of this question have not differed since the first series of this specification and success is guaranteed for students who consider all required aspects in their response. Most frequent defaulters were students who left out one or more of the stated aspects, including those who relied on implied qualities. Each of the aspects in the question should be clearly identified with a statement relating to their piece.

A common mistake was to identify the geographical location of their performance space rather than the configuration of the audience, which is far more useful to an examiner who does not know a centre's particular drama studio. There should also be a brief identification of the nature of the piece itself, so the title alone is not enough to secure full marks even if it is an apparently well known play. Some students wrote a lengthy essay of two or more pages which is excessive, especially as the omission of one or more required aspects still resulted in a mark lower than top band. The response to this question from design and technical students should be the same as for actors.

Question 02

Centres are reminded of the specification requirements relating to this question as stated on page seven, that it should be focused on 'the nature' of the student's contribution. In 01 they were asked to state whether they were actor or designer or technician and in 03 they were asked the process by which they developed their skills in rehearsals. Here in 02 they were asked to identify actually what these skills were that they applied to this particular piece. Actors should identify their own role, or roles, with regard to the physical and vocal skills they used to play their parts. Designers should identify the appropriate design skills and technicians should identify the appropriate technical skills with sufficient focus on this specific piece of performed drama work.

To score a high mark the focus here must be on the student's own personal role in the work, so discussion on group rehearsal activity is misplaced. This question does not focus on process which is addressed in 03 but should be an explanation of the specific skills applied by the candidate. A common misapprehension by students resulted in lists of rehearsal techniques and general group activity or mention of the generation of ideas, rather than what specific skills they contributed in their role as actor, designer or technician. Successful students explained the vocal and physical skills required to act their role or what design or technical skills they used with regard to either the existing play or the group's created piece.

Question 03

As stated earlier, successful students identified the production role in 01, explained the specific skills applied in 02 and in 03 they analysed the process of preparing their skills for performance, with specific regard for the student's own production role. The focus here should remain on the candidate, so comments on group activity must be related sufficiently to the candidate. This year an analysis of their personal skill improvement was required for a high mark. The many students who sustained this focus scored well on this question. However, too many students provided lists of techniques and exercises without any specific application to the improvement of their skills. Hot seating and forum theatre are undoubtedly useful exercises but it is not enough to just mention them in the answer without any personal context. However, references to these exercises were

enhanced immensely with some appreciation for the improvement of specific skills experienced as a result of their use. Successful students recalled in detail moments in the preparation process when they began to use their skills more effectively.

Drama GCSE is a course of study with each project selected by teachers to develop the expertise of their students and it was in this question that they should have been able to analyse how improvements during preparation affected their progress. Students who provided an inventory of group interaction including personality conflicts, absences or included generic comments on the broad benefits of rehearsing or of learning lines missed the opportunity to discuss their own specific progress in sufficient detail and scored accordingly. Examiners reported a number of fine responses from design and technical students who vividly recalled personal progress at lighting a performance space, or adapting make up designs to developing devised pieces.

Question 04

This question provided an opportunity for students to revel in the success of their work and this essay should be based in the performance occasion and not in the preparation work. 'Particular moments' were required that demonstrated how successful they were. Where students evaluated their work with pertinent references to specific sequences of on-stage action their enthusiasm and delight were often contagious and they scored well. The focus here as throughout Section A is on the student's personal skills so these needed to be clearly indicated in their response. The question allowed for unsuccessful moments of the performance which should have retained a focus on relevant skills. Often students began by considering successful aspects but then thought that they were required to include less effective moments as well. Many of these essays concluded with vague and overlong sections stating what they would have done if they started the process again or if lines had been learnt or the effect of poor production support for their acting. Successful students would keep the evaluation directive in mind throughout their response, not just narrating what happened on stage but giving some indication as to the quality of the work undertaken. Credit was also given to students who were able to evaluate their own contribution with sound supporting detail, while a number were less effective in relying almost exclusively on what others had said to them or to how the audience were reacting during the performance. Successful design and technical students drew the examiners into their experience of the performance event, evaluating specific moments when they demonstrated their specific skills.

Section B

The comments from last year's Report on the Examination remain totally relevant to this year's paper. Exciting scripts tailored to the specific group often resulted in compelling ownership of their play by impressed students who were driven to write about it. Elsewhere there was evidence of scheduled plays repeated for many years with successive year groups, replacing familiarity for enthusiasm. In this minority of centres there were a number who reduced full length plays to one or two scenes that all students were required to perform and then write about. While there are funding issues with replacing a studied text, perhaps a planned programme of text replacement should be considered on perhaps a five year rotation. At the other end of this argument are the centres who undertake cutting edge plays that are beyond the experience and understanding of their students. This year a study of Pinter's *'Mountain Language'* was reduced by one centre to a license to write a cavalcade of swear words in the exam room and a number of students were referred this year from many centres for the strong language reproduced in their responses, rendered inappropriate by the lack of any qualifying context or understanding of the source plays. There is no examiner agenda or censorship implied here but it is worth recording that a number of these students were deflected from providing a decent answer through furnishing long, 'colourful' quotations at the

expense of clear focus on performance issues. The range of texts used by successful students included favourite texts such as *Blood Brothers*, *Shakers*, *Bouncers*, *Teechers*, *Blue Remembered Hills*, *Billy Liar*, *DNA*, *Sparkleshark*, *Kindertransport*, *My Mother Said*, *Inspector Calls*, *Be my Baby* and a healthy number of Shakespeare plays, while some schools used more challenging modern works such as *The Man who mistook his wife for a hat*, *Blue/Orange* and plays by Berkoff, Brecht and Ionesco. The most important lesson to take from this is that success can be enhanced for students if the play texts are appropriate to them.

Question 05

Section B is defined as the study of a scripted play and students scored well when they incorporated pertinent references to the play they performed in engaging with the questions asked of them. This question required 'close reference to script of the play' which is further identified as 'stage directions' and 'what characters do and/or say in the text' and high performing students quoted easily from their learned lines to give specific context for their applied skills while focused impressively on the preparation stages of their work. Often excellent acting responses would consider a closely considered passage of script, providing specific detail of vocal and physical skills, demonstrating impressive understanding of the original script whilst describing how their skills were deployed in rehearsal. Generally responses were enhanced with the inclusion of a clear identification of the extract under discussion. Weaker responses considered more general aspects of the play and provided lists of exercises and techniques with little relationship or application to their own role in the play. Some students failed to notice that the question focus was on the preparation process and some of them wrote too much about the performance at the expense of preparation. Others wrote vaguely about research, hot-seating, role on the wall, off-text improvisation and other standard drama exercises, without actually explaining how these had helped them to meet the demands of the script.

Question 06

Here, as elsewhere in this paper, where students answered the question asked of them they generally scored well, focusing on their personal success and referring to a specific moment of performance. Successful students recalled in often vivid detail their interactions on stage and were sufficiently mindful of the source material to comment on their interpretation. Weaker responses were dominated by plot narrative or unqualified expressions of excellence. The focus here as elsewhere on this paper is concerned with personal skills and students need to keep this in mind always. Often responses were limited to an analysis of what they should have done rather than their actual performance, while others drifted into an inappropriate discussion of preparation work. Many students gave a general overview of the success of the piece and the success of the performance with little detailed reference to skills applied in interpreting the text. These students approached the question as a general evaluation rather than answering the question asked. Weaker students lacked any reference to interpretation of the script whilst stronger students gave clear details of their skills in relation to the script.

Question 07

The focus here was on how students interpreted the script in the early stages of rehearsal and how they developed their creative ideas, including specific details of research, rehearsal and preparation work. The strongest responses demonstrated an excellent understanding of the play through close reading of the script with meaningful research and experimentation during the early stages of rehearsal. Many students noted that their interpretation had changed during rehearsal and gave clear examples of the process which resulted in this change. Very useful detail of

rehearsal strategies and techniques were given which were firmly rooted in and driven by the script. Credit was given when students included specific examples from the rehearsal process and preparatory period which helped them secure an understanding of the play. Many successful answers included a detailed explanation of character, design or technical element, with some reference to personal research, rehearsal and preparation work. A number of them were then able to clearly link this preparation work to the application of their skills as required by their interpretation of the particular text.

Less successful responses were often vague and showed a poor understanding of how research might be used to illuminate themes within the play and so aid understanding of their role within it. Little context was given in this type of response and too often the examiner had to guess which character acting students had played. Research strategies varied in efficacy with some recalling apposite on-line searches but too often students referred to Youtube as exemplary performance work to be emulated and, in a number of submissions, copied wholesale with no further justification offered. Responses based on technical or design skills could occasionally be very short on skill detail and appropriate terminology, although there were some lighting pieces which gave excellent detail, explaining the selection of colour gels and of lanterns based on research and experiment during the preparation period, demonstrating how this informed their final decisions and enhanced the group's overall concept.

Question 08

The focus in this question was on the evaluation of success in the application of students' chosen skills to achieve an appropriate style and/or genre. Stronger students used the precise terms of the question and began their answers by stating that there were particular moments which identified how the style and/or genre had been achieved. Genre and style are terms that have featured in all previous series of this exam in Section A and it is reasonable to assume that students are capable of transferring this to their study of a set text. Genre was commented on more than style with some successful responses focusing on creating comedy but too many students failed to offer personal evaluation of their success relying instead on the audience's/teacher's/examiner's laughter, tears or rapt attention to validate their performances. There were also many answers which dealt with the corporate achievement of the group and failed to engage with the notion that their own skills needed to be evaluated. Successful design and technical students focused on how their lighting enhanced a gothic piece or how costume contributed to a melodrama.

Section C

Page 8 of the specification states quite clearly that the performances seen should be of scripted work and that students are required to study the performance material before and after the visit. This does not necessarily mean that they have to obtain copies of the script to enable this study but it does mean that they should have an informed understanding of the style, genre and plot of the play so that their focus is on how the performance is constructed rather than the narrative of the plot. This information has featured heavily in previous Reports on the Examination for past papers and it has proven to be a feature of high scoring students in the past that they have been able to recognize the difference between the script and the performance. Too often in the past students have focused on what Mickey did in '*Blood Brothers*' rather than taking the actor's perspective. This play remains a favoured play to visit heading the list of plays seen, closely followed by '*Woman in Black*', and '*39 steps*' with some tailored touring performances by companies like Splendid Productions strongly featured in responses. Care should be taken however to nurture students' own personal responses, rather than identifying one particular scene or two particular actors to fit all questions that may be asked.

Question 09

Here was a case to demonstrate the problem of imposing an approved scene in advance of the exam. This question asked students to identify a favourite scene which should have given rise to enthusiastic engagement in the responses but too many students had been primed with the scene upon which to focus irrespective of the question asked, with the result that there was often very little evidence that these were 'favourite' scenes at all. Good answers identified both the favourite scene and the actor, writing enthusiastically about the specific skills the actor had used to good effect in the scene. These answers closely linked moments of action to particular skills employed by the actor such as a convincing accent, effective use of physical theatre and the use of gesture to show a reaction. These responses were often supported with precise reference to the chosen actor's use of voice, face and physical expression in a specific section of the play and many students achieved very high marks writing with precise detail about a performance that they obviously admired integrating relevant references to interaction with the audience or other cast members and the creation of comedy or other emotion.

It was clear which students had studied the plays they were discussing as they made clear references to the source play and this enabled them to comment more specifically upon what the actor did. Students who first identified their favourite scene often wrote more vividly than those who did not. A key word in the question was 'effective' and only students who described effective acting were answering the question in its own terms. Weaker students tended to describe the action of the scene with limited reference to the actor's skills or they discussed more than one actor which was self limiting, while others chose to discuss the actor across the production rather than in a favourite scene. Some students wrote in narrative form about what the character did on stage rather than on the actor's performance.

Question 10

This question focused on an evaluation of the actor's ability to interpret the script in one or more moments from the production with reference to both the script of the play as well as the actor's performance. However there was no expectation that the candidate would quote at length from the script as this was not a test of memory. Students' reference to the script of the play might include the action within a scene, some paraphrasing of dialogue, stage directions and/or quoted aspects from the text in order to locate moments of creditable acting. With this approach in mind most students were able to refer to the script of the play in support of their evaluation of the actor's interpretation at selected moments. Examiners reported seeing some excellent answers to this question where there was an expressed appreciation of the actor's skills in relation to the written play. Many successful students discussed their own interpretation of the role and then went on to discuss the actor's ability to interpret the script in performance with good detail of vocal and physical skills. Less good responses were vague in terms of locating moments of action or there were too many vague references to acting skills. It must be repeated here that a working knowledge of the script is a specification requirement and in previous series of this exam, students who have exploited this understanding have always prospered.

Question 11

The focus for this question is on a moment of theatre and how this was enhanced by specific design or technical skills. A number of successful students focused on '*The Woman in Black*' with a very clear description of the use of gauze or of lighting effects in scenes at Eel Marsh House. These responses were enhanced with apposite technical detail that demonstrated good personal understanding. Other successful responses considered the set in '*The 39 Steps*' or the lighting in '*War Horse*'. There were also effective responses focusing on the set in '*Equus*'. While there was evidence that some students had been very well prepared for this question, too often responses from a centre were practically identical, especially for '*The 39 Steps*'. This would be a response

that they had learnt rather than a personal response and typically these responses described the set in detail but did not make clear reference to any specific moment of theatre. There were some good responses based on lighting in *War Horse* but the corporate response of some centres appeared to dissuade more able students from offering their own personal responses. Where students had all learnt a set response there was a lack of personal insight and minimal sense of a moment of theatre. Good technical students did address colour, intensity and specials in lighting and design students did consider colour, materials and/or construction of set. Weaker answers were narrative based and lacked focus on the practical details of design and technical skills.

Question 12

This question focused on an evaluation of the success of the chosen design or technical skill in realising the playwright's intentions or supporting the company's interpretation of it, with reasons to support this evaluation. There were many lighting students who responded particularly well to this question and were able to give really detailed evaluations about the effectiveness of the lighting plot in realising the playwright's intentions. An example of this was in *Woman in Black* when a pathway to the door that Kipps had thought was locked suddenly appeared, through stage lighting, on stage. Students were able to recognise that a barn door had been used to create this pathway and could register that this had added to the tension which the playwright or company had wanted at this moment. A feature of successful students was their ability to evaluate the effects created in good detail, explaining their reasons for their evaluations. Most answers that were unsuccessful were so because the students had insufficient technical knowledge or had not appreciated the focus of the question or the need to justify their views.

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