



Performance Studies

A LEVEL

Performance Studies: Caryl Churchill

Topic Exploration Pack

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This activity offers an opportunity for English skills development.



Teacher Guide

Caryl Churchill is one of the practitioners in the Performance Studies AS unit G402, Performance Contexts 1.

This is a 2-hour written paper with questions on two different practitioners. One hour, therefore, is the optimum time for candidates to tackle Churchill.

The specification says that candidates must study one work, the choice being left to the centre's discretion but it must 'demonstrate broad trends in the output of that practitioner' and 'comment generally on the relationship between the work studied and the practitioner's output as a whole.'

Questions test knowledge and understanding in one or more of the following:

- structure and form – how Churchill organises materials within her work and the effects this organisation produces;
- elements of the performing arts – how she exploits dialogue, characterisation, physicality, proxemics, tension and other dramatic elements and the links across the art forms;
- performance techniques – what approaches and specific skills performers of her works adopt in performing her plays;
- stylistic influences – how is she influenced by and her work informed by the styles of other practitioners, genres and cultures;
- contexts - how she explores, reflects and is influenced by social, historical and cultural contexts.

This pack is designed to introduce teachers and students to Caryl Churchill for preparation of G402 or any other exam, stand-alone study or as part of wider drama and theatre studies.

Biography

Students often think that a practitioner's life story will tell them all they need to know. Certainly it's helpful to understand that she was born in 1938 in London and has been described as Britain's most successful female playwright.

Widely reported to be influenced by Brecht and to be a postmodern practitioner using surrealistic narratives and fragmented episodes, she takes risks with unconventional structures. She manipulates and breaks down language and dramatic structure. She collaborates with other practitioners. She creates from her powerful social commitment and world view with a frequent political dimension to her writing.

Therefore an overview of her life and her catalogues of works is a good starting point. After all, artists are products of their times and are influenced by a wide range of events, people and circumstances in a lifetime.

Prior Knowledge

The assumption is that students will have a working knowledge of the elements, vocabulary and practice of drama, of improvisation and of studying scripts with a view to taking them from page to stage.

Some knowledge of the theories of Brecht is essential. A passing grasp of Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty would be useful.

Teachers will find it helpful to select either complete texts or a range of extracts in advance of doing practical work. It is also recommended that practical experimenting comes early in the study, even before any scripts are read.

For preparation of the written aspect, previous questions and mark schemes provide a solid training base applicable to exam or analysis of plays.

Churchill's use of non-naturalistic techniques, strong feminist themes, abuses of power and sexual politics need to be considered by the teacher before being presented to students.

Sources of Information

The most comprehensive book on Performance Contexts 1 is '*Performance Studies for A Level*' by John Pymm, Gail Deal and Mark Lewinski, Hodder Education (2008) ISBN: 978 0340 967 539. Published in association with OCR this book demonstrates how to teach the other units of Performance Studies A-Level, too.

The British Council has a succinct biography, published plays and awards filed under literature <http://literature.britishcouncil.org/caryl-churchill> , which demonstrates that it's possible to study her work as literature or her as a creator of performance to an audience. Ideally, it should be as both.

Churchill is not much filmed, but there is a hard-to-come-by DVD of 'Top Girls' and some reviews of the play and discussion post-performance are useful at Amazon <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Top-Girls-Caryl-Churchill-DVD/dp/0749228210> .

'Top Girls' is available in several versions on YouTube

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TxTHq1Hi9Ws> which gives a realistic flavour of the play.

A version of 'Seven Jewish Children' is on YouTube

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IYAYnJ6HZ5M> courtesy of The Guardian.

Some taster clips from 'Cloud Nine' are on YouTube

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cl2wJMJ8ofg>

A version of 'A Number' is on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lc9ZtEU32io>

Extract from the opening monologue of 'The Skriker' is on YouTube

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-rBZmlqVshI>

Actor Samuel West wrote a tribute to Churchill and why she has enjoyed longevity in the Daily Telegraph, April 2015 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/11556204/Caryl-Churchill-the-David-Bowie-of-contemporary-theatre.html>

Teachers will find a useful way of evaluating performance is through reviews of her work. One example is from the Guardian (April 2015) on the revival of her 1976 play Light Shining in Buckinghamshire <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/apr/26/light-shining-in-buckinghamshire-review-caryl-churchill-national>

'P is for Political Theatre', article by Michael Billington in The Guardian about what political theatre achieves <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/mar/27/p-political-theatre-modern-drama> is helpful background for both teachers and students.

Devising Theatre resources from the TES, aimed at GCSE level, but useful ideas for all teachers and students when exploring issue-based drama through improvisation

<https://www.tes.co.uk/teaching-resource/devising-theatre-6315265>

The Texts

Churchill has written over 50 works but the ones that should focus minds to begin with are:

'Vinegar Tom' (1976), a feminist play about gender and power relationships during the 17th century witchcraft trials in England.

'Cloud Nine' (1979), a farce about sexual politics, relationships, colonisation and cross-gender casting.

'Top Girls' (1982), about women and the work-family dilemma, power politics in an all-female cast.

'Fen' (1983), intergenerational study of women's roles, aspirations, expectations and attitudes in a harsh environment.

'Serious Money' (1987), satirical look at the stock market and financial excesses.

'A Number' (2002), about human cloning and identity.

'Drunk Enough to Say I Love You' (2006), described by The Daily Telegraph 'as glib and nasty a piece of anti-American agitprop as I have ever seen.'

'Seven Jewish Children' (2009), a 10 minute play about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

'Love and Information' (2012), reviewed by The Guardian - 'we live in a world where information bombardment is in danger of leading to atrophy of memory, erosion of privacy and decay of feeling.'

'Ding Dong the Wicked' (2012), is a 20 minute piece dealing with war, killing, families and paranoia.

Approaches

For exploring Caryl Churchill it's recommended that teachers select their preferred playscript(s) to study.

In this order the easiest way to approach the teaching is:

- Background including biography
- Stylistic influences
- Cultural, social and historical contexts of the play
- The plot in summary
- Key themes
- Performance style(s)

As well as a study of theory and factual information, practical work is particularly important. Students could be asked to devise a drama piece around the themes and/or characters to get a better understanding of the text studied.

A read-through round a class is a good introduction to the text itself, with the teacher reading stage directions and interjecting comments which direct thinking and encourage questions students may have.

Small groups trying one scene or section, all working on the same extract is best, followed by sharing and peer assessment. This should be followed by more focused performance skills with students taking it in turns to direct each other.

Extracts should be polished, as this helps passages to be learned by heart and meaning to be explored and conveyed better.

It is useful to teacher and peer assess the group polished performances, perhaps using the G404 repertoire mark scheme from 2011 onwards. www.ocr.org.uk/i-want-to/download-past-papers/

Research could begin the process, but many teachers will find that if interest is already awakened in a particular theme, issue or idea through improvisation and reading some text, then research will be more valuable.

The internet is full of helpful sites. Reviews of productions of her plays are always informative, even those that are quite old. YouTube has various clips and performances. For example there are several versions of *Seven Jewish Children* – all different, all fascinating to consider others' insights into the play's purpose and message.

Teachers will take every opportunity to see any live Churchill being done locally. Occasionally the arts programmes on TV feature some aspect of her work.

Lesson Activity 1

Warm up:

In small groups, the teacher asks students to create a scene in which all are looking for something valuable which is lost, building it to a panic. The teacher invites each group to share their scene in turn.

The same groups are asked to repeat the scene but with one as an uninvolved bystander making a commentary from the side, of everything that is unfolding which may be funny and/or unkind for benefit of the audience.

Same groups, different scene. One of them faints in street and is surrounded by concerned strangers. On recovering he/she is convinced one of others has stolen purse or wallet.

The teacher asks the groups to repeat and add in a) a bystander making comments and b) that the person who lost purse/wallet addresses audience directly to say how he/she feels.

Discussion:

The teacher explains that they have just experimented with dispassionate commentary of the obvious with a viewpoint (comic, serious, hurtful) and direct address to the audience. Both are Brechtian techniques.

Provide a summary of his techniques and how they appear in drama:

- Epic theatre, theatricalism (the audience are aware they are in a theatre) and alienation or maintaining an emotional distance between actors and characters.
- Verfremdungseffekt or v-effekt or 'making strange', distancing.
- Episodic or montage, where scenes may be played in any order and maintain integrity of structure.

- Actors do not act, but demonstrate a part.
- Their gestures plus their attitudes are 'gestus', inviting audience to realise that what they say is more important than immersing in a character, scenery/set, lighting or the illusions of theatrics.
- Incongruity provokes thought. For example something out of keeping on stage makes audience question.
- Changing roles during a piece is used to break emotional links between characters and actors. This became multi-roling, used frequently by Churchill and John Godber, for example.
- There is frequently a strong political message for the audience.

Improvise round a theme:

Groups are asked to devise a scene where rough soldiers, who are intimidating a group of peasants, discover one is hiding a baby who may or may not be his/her own. Teacher asks groups to devise first as a piece of powerful, emotional and realistic drama.

Then after sharing, asks them to repeat with a Brechtian interpretation – dispassionate commentary, direct address and changing roles to break any illusion of emotional involvement in characters.

Stimulus:

Read from The Bible, 1 Kings 3, verses 16 – 18 about Solomon's wise ruling when two women claimed ownership of a baby.

Improvisation:

Ask groups to devise The Bible scene as either naturalistic or Brechtian.

Text:

The class reads the version from Brecht's 'Caucasian Chalk Circle', Scene 6.

Plenary:

The lesson has been about applying some Brechtian techniques to a piece of improvisation, taking a potentially emotional situation and performing it without emotional attachment and reading a piece of text that handles the topic in a particular way.

Lesson Activity 2

Warm up:

The teacher shows a YouTube clip of one short section from a Churchill play, followed by the same extract performed in a different way.

Present published reviews of different productions of the same Churchill play. If possible, reviews by different writers of the same production are even more useful.

Discussion:

Teacher lead discussion – How do people see different perspectives from what is apparently the same event? How can somebody watching a play interpret it very far from what Churchill may have intended.

Politics:

Teachers should explain the political spectrum left to right. What does Caryl Churchill believe generally?

Research:

Students are asked to find out as far as possible what Caryl Churchill has said about a particular play or theme. There are news items of her appearances; there are written quotations she has given on particular issues.

Deconstruction:

Teacher explains that taking a play apart to consider its meaning is called deconstruction. A postmodernist would put it back together again by altering particular parts of it.

Students should be able to analyse how stage directions, lighting, costume, settings, transitions between scenes, multi-rolling, gross-gender acting and the fact that she is a British woman impact on what the audience sees and remembers.

Churchill herself declines to speak publicly about her work, as The Guardian pointed out in 2012 <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/oct/03/caryl-churchill-collaborators-interview> but we can draw conclusions ourselves. One interview in the New York Times (1990) <http://www.nytimes.com/1990/04/29/theater/theater-caryl-churchill-ex-ideologue-trusts-to-luck.html> is quite revealing, but is not necessarily valid today.

Presentation:

In small groups students are asked to prepare a short group presentation on the meanings of and behind a scene from a particular play chosen by the teacher. Students should use scripts to illustrate and support their arguments.

Lesson Activity 3

From the OCR archive of previous questions and mark schemes. www.ocr.org.uk/i-want-to/download-past-papers/ teachers prepare sets of questions to use in lessons over a period of time after devising around themes/issues and after practical exploration of text(s) has given students familiarity with the work.

First step:

Take two questions from the archive and teachers talk them through. Are they focused primarily on contexts, stylistic influences, performance techniques or elements of the performing arts? Ask students to work through and make planning notes in pairs.

It's essential that students appreciate while every question has a focus, it cannot be answered well without including something from the other focus points. For example, it's hard to talk about a Churchill play without using drama elements, knowing what influenced her and the social, political, historical and cultural contexts in which she wrote.

Second step:

Take another pair of previous questions, repeat the approach. Teachers then ask students to draft out a response to one question.

Third step:

Teacher marks the responses and students mark each others simultaneously by reference to the Mark Scheme.

Fourth step:

Repeat with a different set of archive questions, never giving more than two question choices at a time.

Fifth step:

Students are asked to sit in exam conditions and answer one question from the archive they have not yet seen and in an hour only.

These should then be teacher and peer marked against the relevant Mark Scheme.



Student Sheets

Student Sheet 1

Adapted from the Performance Studies Mark Schemes:

Churchill's fingerprints:

- Churchill uses structural dramatic devices including episodic action, non-linear time to shift audience perspective
- uses near real life language, often with overlapping dialogue to represent human communication or experiments with the function of language itself
- uses precise, evocative and economical dialogue including the unspoken or partly voiced, perhaps from her training as a radio dramatist
- uses plotlines that explore relative power, status, sexuality, gender conflicts and frequently takes a moral or political stance
- uses her real sense of history to challenge perceptions, subvert timelines, relate previous times to later ones
- uses historical and/or allegorical characters to locate or dislocate audience perspective
- uses representational staging and acting styles to explore the extremes in some works (Cloud Nine)
- uses stage images that have more impact than words, especially at key plot points
- uses a keen awareness of current issues to explore the roles of women in both contemporary and historical societies
- uses the audience itself to make their own judgements on outcomes through moral and social questions that have been raised.

QUESTION: Are there any trademark fingerprints you have identified in a Churchill play you have studied that are not included above?



Student Sheet 2

Quality of Written Communication (QWC)

If Churchill is being studied for a written assessment, the quality of the written English will play an important part. In Performance Contexts 1, for example, Knowledge and Understanding is worth up to 24 marks, while QWC could gain 6 marks per question. That 20% of the mark could make a difference of a grade in the exam.

Dos

Do spell her first name correctly, Caryl.

Do give her play titles initial capital letters. Top Girls, Serious Money.

Do give the names of characters initial capital letters too.

Do make any direct quotation from a play or other source clear with the speech marks, such as 'Every angel is a species.'

Do make sure you have read and understood the question. It will never ask you to write all you know about Caryl Churchill.

Do use performance-specific words correctly.

Do use quotes from the play(s) to support what you are saying, but make them relevant and not just something you have memorised to suit any occasion.

Do use references from other practitioners, commentators, songs, films that are relevant to support your response to the question.

Do you have a sense of Churchill's repertoire, even though you may have only closely studied one play?

Do remember you are writing about performance designed for an audience, not a work of literature.

FINALLY, do plan your time carefully. If you have an hour, jot down a plan. Opening should be relevant and get into the question. Conclusion should be a short, sharp wrap-up.

Don'ts

Don't call her Caryl. In an essay she is Churchill.

Don't spell incorrectly any words given in the question.

Don't use etc, it is meaningless.

Don't use text speak or unnecessary abbreviations such as &.

Don't open an essay with a long-winded biography unless it's helpful in answering the actual question.

Don't write a conclusion which merely repeats what you have already said.

Don't write extensive rambling sentences and/or paragraphs.

Don't make sweeping statements and generalisations that are not backed up.

FINALLY, don't use a formulaic response in which you end every paragraph with repeating the question and think you have answered it.



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