

Berkoff: An exploration of the practitioner, Total Theatre and his text

AS/A2

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Introduction

This scheme uses several of Berkoff's texts and adaptations to explore his technique and Total Theatre. This would fulfil many different A level specifications (both current and forthcoming) that require the exploration of a practitioner. Several of his texts and monologues are used within the scheme, which could also be of benefit to students who would enjoy and do well in physical and non-naturalistic roles for exam purposes.

Learning objectives

By the end of this scheme *all* students will:

- ▶ Have developed their understanding of what Total Theatre is
- ▶ Have developed their ability to work physically in drama
- ▶ Have developed their understanding of theatre practitioner Steven Berkoff, his style and works
- ▶ Have developed their ability to use text alongside physical theatre
- ▶ Have developed their mime, chorus/ensemble skills.

By the end of this scheme *some* students will:

- ▶ Have developed their characterisation in performance skills.

Lesson 1: Key features of Steven Berkoff's style

Learning objectives

By the end of the lesson students will have learnt:

- ▶ How to identify and define key aspects of Berkoff's Total Theatre style and all that it might encompass
- ▶ How to begin to work physically with Berkoff's style
- ▶ How to work collaboratively with others in discussion and practical work
- ▶ How to develop mime alongside minimal spoken language.

Warm-up (10 mins)

Students stand in the centre of the room. When teacher shouts 'Go!' they must all run to all four walls, and then back to the centre.

Repeat the activity, but this time in between touching each wall they return to the centre.

Then repeat again, but this time they must shout a sound, not a word, when they touch the wall, and when they get to the centre they must make a large gesture – it can be anything, so long as it isn't a recognisable mimed action.

Now they form a circle. The teacher starts the activity by pointing at one student and saying 'You'. In doing so, there must be a sense to the 'You', i.e. it is said as a question, an accusation, etc., with an accompanying inflection, change in volume and physicality, including facial expression. The student who is pointed at then points at someone else, and in a different way they say 'You'. This then continues with students encouraged to explore the word in as many different physical and aural ways as possible, whilst still remaining in the circle.

After this, introduce them to Berkoff with PowerPoint slide 2, which gives basic introductory information.

Main activity

Students are asked to stand in a circle and each person will complete a very short mime associated with a task. The sequence must be something that can be copied easily and remembered.

Each person in turn does their action, freezes, and the circle then repeats what

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Resources

- ▶ PowerPoint presentation at the end of this scheme of work
- ▶ Internet access.

The very first warm-ups to each lesson should be physical and energetic and could easily include energisers from other practitioners, e.g. Frantic Assembly or stretching exercises in the form of yoga or by practitioner Grotowski.

they have seen, trying to keep at the same pace as each other and the original mime. If necessary, the original is re-shown to ensure the copying is precise.

Students choose one of the activities just copied other than their own. They then develop it by adding in sounds linked to the actions – such as slurping if having food – and the odd verb, adjective or noun here and there linked to what is going on, but not forming a narration or sentences.

Add to this a metronome, which is at first set to a slow rhythm. Students develop their routine so it is the same every time but is in response to the pace of the metronome. After doing it slowly, the metronome is then speeded up and the routine responds in pace, while keeping to all the same actions and sound/spoken words.

Students show the work to each other, the teacher/facilitator making it clear that Berkoff experiments in his technique – with language, with pace and rhythm, with the body miming what is being said, and with repetition – which is what they have just been doing.

Having explored, watched and evaluated the work, they now extend it by experimenting with scale and exaggeration – another important aspect of Berkoff and his Total Theatre.

Ask students to mime cleaning their teeth, acting it out in exactly the way they normally do it. Get them to be precise and discuss their order: is it wet the brush first, is it toothpaste on then under the water, is it a manual brush or electric brush they are holding, etc. Students then repeat their brushing, but imagining everything is ten times bigger in scale. They have to think about all their actions being this much bigger and all objects being this much bigger. They rehearse this new routine so it is exactly the same each time, but with the new, exaggerated scale.

Now repeat, but the exaggerated scale is times 100. Movements should take up the room; it should be much harder to pick up the toothbrush; turning the tap might require both arms to be used in a giant circular action. They can vocally express the extra effort with exaggerated sounds.

All students then show their work, but not as individuals. Number students one or two; ones show the work all at the same time with twos watching, then swap. Ask students to reflect on what they experience both as audience and as performers.

Plenary

Ask students what they are now beginning to understand as key features linked to Berkoff. Then show them PowerPoint slide 3 as a re-cap list of the words from the day.

Lesson 2: Key features of Steven Berkoff's style as explored through *Metamorphosis* – Part 1

Learning objectives

By the end of the lesson students will have learnt:

- ▶ Further detail in how to identify and define key aspects of Berkoff's Total Theatre style
- ▶ How to develop their ability to work physically with Berkoff's style
- ▶ How to work collaboratively with others in discussion and practical work
- ▶ How to develop mime and chorus/ensemble alongside spoken language using one of his key texts, *Metamorphosis*.

Warm-up (5 mins)

Any physical game of your choosing to energise. It does not have to link to Berkoff and could be a warm-up by Boal, Frantic Assembly, Grotowski or any drama game with pace to wake students and ready them to work vocally and physically.

Extended warm-up (10 mins)

Repeat the 'You' game from Lesson 1.

Having experimented with one word now they are given the line – from *Metamorphosis* – 'I feel sick' (spoken by Gregor).

Each student stands in a space and says the line as naturalistically as possible the first time. Then they are encouraged to exaggerate it both vocally and physically times 10 and then times 100. They are then asked to repeat the times 10 or times 100 exaggeration, but increasing in pace each time as well. They should reflect on how this makes them feel, and some are spotlighted to be shown and others discuss what it is like to watch the repetitions and exaggerations.

Music with different tempo could be used instead, or as an extension.

Spotlight a couple of examples for students to watch and evaluate.

Extension

Use the metronome to change the pace as well as scale and potentially add in the words and sounds as before.

Homework

The homework would depend on whether this is being run for assessed coursework or not. Students could be set research homework to find out more about Berkoff's work or they could write up what they have done and learnt in the lesson. This could be the same after each lesson.

Chorus and ensemble feature heavily in Berkoff's work and so developing skills and experimenting as a chorus will feature in this scheme at various points.

Students then get into groups (5+) and form a chorus; they repeat the line exaggerated at a medium pace with everyone in their group/chorus doing exactly the same thing vocally and physically with the simple line. This is then shown and evaluated from both an audience and performer viewpoint.

Discussion

Ask students to come up with a definition of the word 'metamorphosis'.

Show PowerPoint slide 4 with its definition of the term and its link from Kafka to Berkoff.

Then show PowerPoint slide 5 – the plot of *Metamorphosis*.

Discuss the end question. Then tell students that they will work with some of the plot and extended sections of the text to explore Berkoff's style and Total Theatre further (PowerPoint slide 6).

Main activity

Each student stands alone in the space. The teacher counts 1 – 6 slowly. On each number, each student moves from stage to stage as if transforming into Gregor the beetle. By the sixth count, they are in the final beetle-like shape, frozen. When the number 7 is called (after a pause) the student says the line 'I feel sick' as if speaking like a metamorphosed human-to-insect. This is repeated so that students can improve how they form themselves into a beetle-like shape. Ask them to really think about making angles with their limbs and making the position look dynamic, perhaps painful, staccato on each count called; certainly not 'fluid' and enjoyable.

Spotlight some students who have really challenged themselves with the shape they have formed.

Read PowerPoint slide 7.

Students should try to move as the transformed beetle. There must be control to ensure that this is a meaningful exploration and not simply 'a laugh' and reflect afterwards on the challenges they are facing.

PowerPoint slide 8 is then read as they move, and they should aim to respond to what they hear.

This then leads into the next activity.

Students form groups of 6. They get into a beetle formation as a group of 6 with one person clearly as the head and able to speak when asked to do so. The group remembers this shape and needs to be able to form it later.

The groups of 6 then form the family – Gregor, Greta his sister, and the mother and father – as if in a family portrait with the other two students being the stools that the females sit on in front of the two men behind.

The teacher counts 1–6 aloud again. This time, every number means someone moves into their part of the group beetle.

When 7 is called out, the 'head' part says again 'I feel sick' in an exaggerated way fitting the unwell and transformed character of Gregor.

Plenary

Students have discovered more of Berkoff's style and his 'Total Theatre' which can be re-capped using PowerPoint slide 9.

Lesson 3: Key features of Steven Berkoff's style as explored through *Metamorphosis* – Part 2

Learning objectives

By the end of the lesson students will have learnt:

- ▶ How to develop further their confidence and ability to work physically with Berkoff's style
- ▶ How to work collaboratively with others in discussion and practical work
- ▶ How to develop mime and chorus/ensemble alongside spoken language using one of his key texts, *Metamorphosis*.

Warm-up (5 mins)

Again, any energiser to wake body and voices can be chosen.

Extended warm-up

PowerPoint slide 10, the *Metamorphosis* text from the last lesson, is on the board. Students stand in a circle and choose a word from the section.

The class face outwards and one by one they say their chosen word, one after the other, looking straight ahead, neutral face and tone.

There are disputes about what Gregor transforms into as Kafka's text specifies only really 'insect'. Only later in interviews/letters, did Kafka confirm it was a beetle, and he never specified the dung beetle that Berkoff asserts Gregor becomes. This forms an interesting debate, but essentially the students should understand what would be implied by beetle or dung beetle in terms of a metaphor.

There are many clips on YouTube of people as Gregor in productions of *Metamorphosis*. It might be interesting to show the students an example and to discuss the style and effect. Staging, the use of lighting and music are features also to discuss with many of the clips, helping students to understand the importance of every element in Total Theatre.

Extension 1

When in the family portrait, they could speak a line of text linked to their character. How this is done could be experimented with, i.e. overlapping; one on each count; etc. It could also be a line juxtaposed to the positivity of their fixed facial expression revealing their selfishness or disgust at what Gregor becomes. The line could be given to them, or they could have to read sections and find key lines for themselves. The effect of the added dialogue should be evaluated and Berkoff's intentions discussed.

Extension 2

If there are students in the class who are particularly interested in the technical aspects of a production, then they could be asked to light the short scene, thinking about the use of lighting at different levels and the use of shadows or colours for effect. A student interested in sound may be asked to add in percussion or synthesised sounds to underscore the scene. This will help them and all students to engage yet further with the ideas of Total Theatre in terms of design working with the acting.

It doesn't matter if two have chosen the same word, but if several have the same word get them to swap so there is variety.

After it has been round the circle once, they then repeat, only this time there must be a mime/gesture and definite intention in the use of the voice, just as there was when they played the 'You' game in previous lessons.

Once they have been round the circle once more, it repeats again, but this time when they have said their word (with intention and gesture as before) they then turn and begin to form a bug shape in the centre of the circle. When they go into the circle they must be quick about adding themselves to what is already forming; they can't plan this, it must be spontaneous work as an ensemble. Eventually there will be one giant beetle centrally and on the called command 'Now' all say 'I feel sick' and move very slightly as if part of the struggling beetle.

Main activity

PowerPoint slide 11 – a very famous section from *Metamorphosis*.

Students are asked in groups of varying sizes to apply their current understanding of Berkoff to the text. They rehearse and then show, with as little further input as possible.

Plenary

The results are watched and evaluated. The use of different group sizes should encourage lots of different responses and hopefully students will engage with the opportunity of potentially experimenting with repetition, exaggeration, scale, rhythm, chorus/ensemble, gesture and mime.

Lesson 4: Key features of Steven Berkoff's style as explored through *The Trial*

Learning objectives

By the end of the lesson students will have learnt:

- ▶ How to develop further their confidence and ability to work physically with Berkoff's style
- ▶ How to work collaboratively with others in discussion and practical work
- ▶ How to develop mime and chorus/ensemble alongside spoken language using one of his key texts – *The Trial* – and texts beyond Berkoff
- ▶ How to develop use of bodies as 'environment' within physical theatre work.

Warm-up (5 mins)

10-Second Object: students walk around the room, a number is called, and they get into groups randomly of that number, and then an object is called out and they form the shape in 3D, using all the members of their group. Sound and movement can be added as an extension.

Extended warm-up

In groups of 8, one person is the human in their 'house'. The objects in their 'house' are formed by everyone else in their group. The person walks around as if just having an average day in their home. When they exit one room they freeze and the room changes to represent a different room in their house. The person walks back as if into the new room and continues interacting with the objects. Students should be encouraged to form the shapes, to have movements and sounds of the objects, e.g. if they are a light, they have to decide how to represent the switch; maybe their head lifts up with a fixed grin to represent the light being turned on, etc. If they are a washing machine, the 'human' can load them with imaginary washing – but how, for example, do they represent the door of the machine, or the movement once the machine is turned on?

Main activity

PowerPoint slides 12 and 13 to introduce *The Trial*.

Students then form groups of eight, and are given a section of the script which enables them to shift from ensemble to characters, with one student taking on the role of K in each group. They could be directed, or simply explore the section and then rehearse and present it, aiming to achieve environments that the ensemble creates in terms of physical objects and emotional states. The use of sound as well as physicality is encouraged from the ensemble. PowerPoint slide 14 is shown to help the development.

The students could have wooden poles to create shapes, replicating slightly the frames from Berkoff's production, or it could just use their bodies.

If no one engages with the fact that there are characters in this short extract, maybe target one group to do so.

Alternative activity

As an extension try the Brussels Sprout scene from *Hard to Swallow* by Mark Wheeler in which students play all the objects. They follow the stage directions to enact the scene.

Students could be shown a YouTube clip from the play to inspire their exploration, or it could be saved to help evaluate after their own work has been shown.

Plenary

The work is presented and evaluated in terms of its link to the style of Berkoff, and in terms of whether it makes for an interesting and powerful performance.

Lessons 5–8: Berkoff's style in practice in key monologues from *East*, *Decadence* and *Dog*

Learning objectives

By the end of this sequence of lessons students will have learnt:

- ▶ How to develop further their confidence and ability to work physically with Berkoff's style
- ▶ How to develop their performance skills in the non-naturalistic Berkoff style, linking to key monologues by the practitioner.

To conclude this scheme, extended exploration of a monologue or duologue for either formal or informal assessment would enable students to demonstrate their understanding of his style and their ability to deliver one of his non-naturalistic texts. The following is a suggestion of some ways into this and some examples of a monologue that might be selected.

Decadence 'restaurant scene' monologue exploration

To begin, show PowerPoint slide 15. Then PowerPoint slides 16 and 17 are read. Watch either Berkoff in *Decadence* or another version of the scene from YouTube, which students discuss/evaluate.

Students then experiment themselves with re-creating the monologue exactly as Berkoff has explained and the clip has shown it, eventually performing what they have rehearsed.

Alternative monologue exploration: East 'motorbike' monologue

For this watch <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CZXMSGyuDNs> and again discuss the style, the effect, and then set students into pairs (if copying the video exactly) or as a monologue to rehearse and eventually perform what they have seen.

Alternative monologue exploration: Dog monologue

This is a short complete text written as a monologue which offers the student the added complexity of switching from playing the human holding the dog, to being the dog speaking its thoughts aloud.

There are examples on YouTube of students doing this for A level, which could be used to start explorations. Exploration exercises getting students to physicalize animals may help with initial explorations as well.

Plenary

To conclude this part of the scheme each student showcases their work, whether it be in front of the examiner, or to their classmates.

Berkoff affords lots of monologue opportunities elsewhere in the same texts, and in others not covered in this scheme which students could be encouraged to find for themselves.

Extension

They could work in pairs, just as is shown in many YouTube examples, though only one person really speaks, or, as an extension, they produce it as a monologue. As a further alternative, they could also produce it as a chorus/ensemble in small groups.

RESOURCES

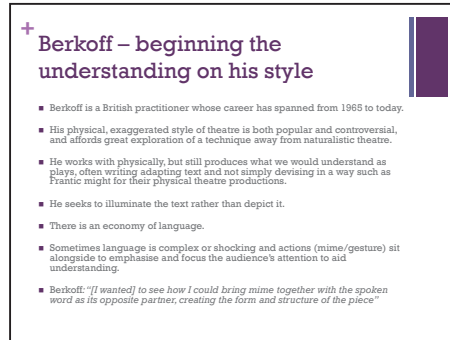
PowerPoint Presentation

Link to download Berkoff PowerPoint document:

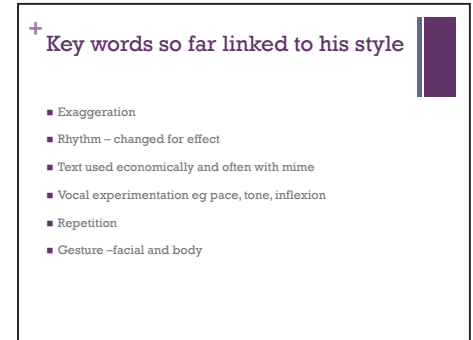
http://www.rhinegold.co.uk/downloads/catalogue_supporting_materials/Berkoff.pptx



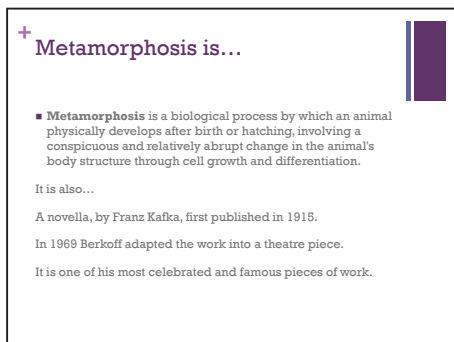
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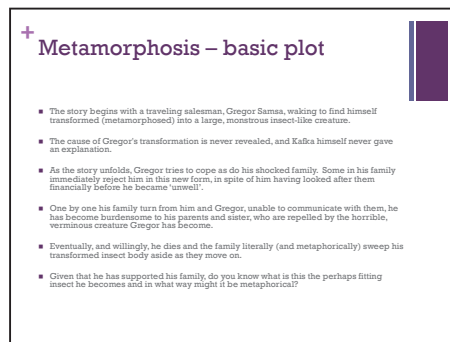
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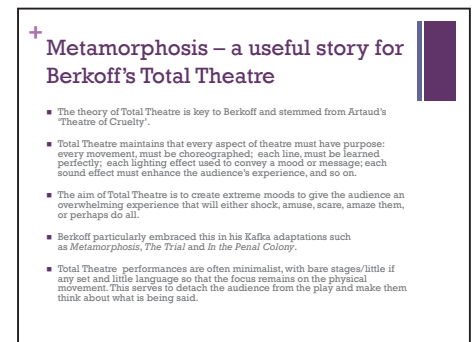
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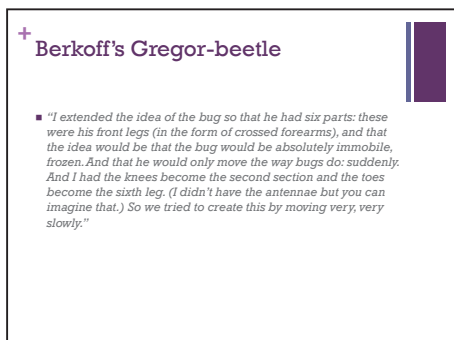
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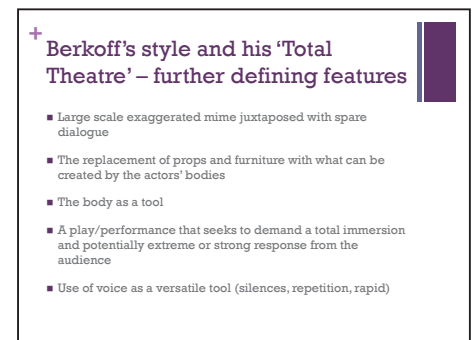
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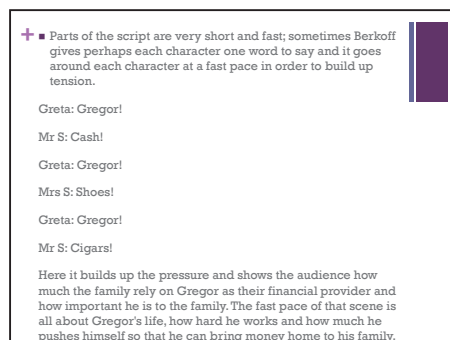
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10



11



12

+ The Trial – Plot & Berkoff's connection to the work

- *The Trial* is a novel written by Franz Kafka in 1915. It tells the story of a man arrested and prosecuted by a remote, inaccessible authority, with the nature of his crime revealed neither to him nor to the reader. It is heavily influenced by Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*.
- Berkoff first began to work on *The Trial* with a group of students when he took a teaching post. He had been teaching mime and movement alongside drama, and when he was asked to put on a more experimental production with the students, he chose the novel, simply because most plays did not have 20 characters. He read out the first line and encouraged the students to act it out, and from that he continued to write a form of play incorporating the use of an ensemble. Berkoff's version was first performed in 1970. It gave the nightmarish style of the play a particular detachment that meant the characters that the actors portrayed did not stay as that character; they would slip back into the ensemble.

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+ Berkoff on his production of *The Trial*

- The ensemble should "search for objects that have no character except when they are being used in direct relation to the actor, when they become charged with life".
- In his production the frames seen in the picture on slide 12 are used as part of the environment, with the actors 'disappearing' as the puppeteers.
- Berkoff made the chorus completely responsible for the mood, physical and psychological environment.

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+ Decadence - 1981

- Steve: We escape to the restaurant/at last some repose/throw off your coat darling/powder your nose/put on some lip gloss/I'll splash my toes/hello Giovanni/How is M'sieur and Madame tonight?/His bright teeth assure us that all is quite normal and right/all is quite safe/the window's double barred/gaint the divided life/our table is ready/how simple hooray/elated wide-eyed/we view the sight/a river of food, barons and knights/a stream of gold, diamonds and pearls/a torrent of lawyers, judges and earls/a splatter of royalty on top/(aside)(hallo Charles, hallo Da) just the sauce that lends a perfect flavour that's absolutely the best/Aperitif? Cinzano and bitter lemon/a crunch of ice/it tastes like heaven/What would Monsieur and Madame like? Some salmon lums/smoked just perfect/its flesh tears like silk/was spawned in Scotch lakes/hung to be cured by those that know the secret of salmon/the ones with the nose/to follow avocado stuffed with prawns/garlic to taste/crushed in a paste/pears as soft as the bellies of babes/prawns crisp as ice/champagne Perignon washes all away in its tide/the mashed hors d'oeuvres all clean inside/the mouth is pink and raw once again/to receive like Gargantua its morsels of fun/what now, oh love decide/steak au poivre or le boeuf sur le toit, noisette d'agneau or poached turbot/crab freshly dropped in a boiling scream so its flesh is sunset pink and taste a dream/fillet mignon with oysters crushed with sauces/that sounds a must/we'll have two of those/some escargot on the side/they taste so divine/cooked in sweet herbs and wine/a Mouton Rothschild chilled to a thaw/wash it down/hmm!

15

+ Berkoff's performance/direction of this monologue...

- When performing this scene, Berkoff exaggerates an upper-class, nasal voice while actively describing the feast.
- He mimes the meal, pouring the wine with a vocal effect; greedily cutting his steak; and tossing mushrooms into the air -- swallowing them with a gulp.
- Through Berkoff's physical-theatre, he creates this scene without props, leaving the set minimalist (performed on a sofa), while paradoxically, creating the image of a cluttered dining table.
- Beyond creating the feast, Berkoff briefly assumes the role of Giovanni.

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+ Berkoff explains...

- 'I used the waiter by very, very quickly creating the figure of Giovanni -- as you would in pantomime when you create figures and leave them in the mind of the audience. Once he's created, there we see him. And sometimes, to create another figure, we may need as a cartoonist, the merest outline; a gesture like a pencil drawing. So Giovanni is just a little moustache [mimes a moustache], an Italian perhaps with a suggestion of a belly [exaggerates his belly]. I step out, leaving the character there with the audience who see it. Then we're back to having created Giovanni, maybe each time we create him, we need less of a signature, just the merest whisper, just an attitude, his physical attitude. Every prop used in the theatre, in some way, diminishes the role of the performer ... it takes away from his art.'

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