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GCSE

**Drama**

8261/W

Report on the Examination

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8261

June 2018

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Version: 1.0

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## Introduction

In this first series of the reformed GCSE Drama qualification it is very pleasing to see that there is evidently an abundance of good work being done in centres to prepare students for this written examination. Examiners have reported that teachers and students appear to have meaningfully engaged with the demands of the paper and it is evident that an enormous amount of practical study of the set texts has been undertaken in order to ensure that students can apply their knowledge flexibly to the demands of the questions. Similarly, centres have evidently guided students through their study of live theatre, and as a result, examiners have noted that there is a palpable excitement and enthusiasm for the work which students have seen. It is hoped that the good practice, which has been demonstrated thus far, continues and that centres find the content of this report useful in order to further refine and focus their delivery of this part of the qualification.

## Section A

The four multiple choice questions in this section assessed students' knowledge and understanding of theatre terminology, roles and responsibilities, stage positioning and configurations.

The different aspects of this question were, on the whole, well answered. The majority of students answered the individual questions correctly. Where students answered incorrectly, they tended to confuse upstage left with upstage right, or mistake a thrust staging configuration for a promenade staging configuration.

## Section B

Questions in this section assessed students' knowledge and understanding of how drama and theatre is made via one of the six set texts from the specification.

The set texts studied are, in order of frequency, *Blood Brothers*, *The Crucible*, *Noughts and Crosses*, *Hansel and Gretel*, *The 39 Steps* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. There was no correlation between the standard of students' responses and their chosen set text.

As mentioned above, examiners reported that it was evident that students had undertaken a great deal of practical study of their chosen set text and were able to transfer the principles of their own knowledge and understanding into coherent responses to the questions.

The majority of students wrote an appropriate amount for each of the questions in this section, though a significant number included extraneous contextual information about their studied text, or wrote an unnecessarily large amount for lower mark tariff questions and appeared to run out of time to complete their response to Question 4 and/or Question 5 and/or Section C.

## Question .1

This question assessed students' understanding of the context of their chosen set text, and asked them to describe a particular design skill which would demonstrate their understanding, in relation to the given extract from the set text.

Students were generally comprehensive and imaginative in their proposals for their designs with most students rooting their decisions firmly in the context of the extract. However other students wrote in detail about their design ideas without specific reference or consideration of the relevant extract in question. Many students of *Blood Brothers*, for example, wrote in detail about their costume designs but would have benefitted from explicitly referencing the appropriate period and location in terms of their costume choices. Most of those writing about *The 39 Steps*, which referred to Professor Jordan as hosting the party, attired him appropriately in evening clothes of the period and were generally successful. Similarly, responses for *The Crucible* which

acknowledged the location of the extract and whether Proctor had walked or ridden were also credited positively.

Props for *Hansel and Gretel* demonstrated students' enthusiasm for Kneehigh's style of presentation and performance with oversized bones, bright colours and eclectic collections of items to dress the stage. The less successful responses would often attempt to describe the setting and make only partial or limited reference to any props which would be appropriate to the printed extract.

Designs for the setting in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Noughts and Crosses* were often very creative and highly sensitive to context and performance style. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* responses which located the extract in Theseus' Palace and made reference to relevant Greek architecture often conveyed an appropriate sense of royal status with marble pillars and columns or mosaic tiles, often with some appropriate set dressing.

Private beach designs for *Noughts and Crosses* which used projection were often a practical way by which the style of the piece could be maintained without an excessive number of items being needed on stage. Most students answering on this text considered the practicalities of the quick transitions required between different scenes and the epic style which required minimum props and stage clutter. There was, however, a little confusion from some students about the location of the extract as some students thought the scene was taking place in a classroom and consequently designed an inappropriate set.

The best responses evidenced students who were able to clearly focus on the context of the printed extract itself with some consideration of the play as a whole.

Examiners noted that a significant number of students included a lot of extraneous information in their response to this question. Most commonly, they would clarify the context of the printed extract from the play itself, or offer lengthy explanations or coverage of the play's social, cultural and/or historical subtext, which would gain no specific credit. The question is focused on a description, and does not necessarily require an explanation to support the given description if the description is clear enough and in itself demonstrates knowledge and understanding of the social, cultural and/or historical context of the extract.

It should also be noted that this question in future could be focused on any of the design skills listed in the current specification.

## **Question .2**

This question asked students to describe how they, as a performer, would vocally and physically deliver a line of dialogue from the printed extract, and explain the effects they would want to create.

Students generally performed very well on this question. The best responses included precise details of a range of skills, in close reference to the whole line. Most students were familiar with the chosen line and the context in which the line was delivered.

The most successful responses would make reference to a wide range of physical and vocal skills, as appropriate, and would focus closely on specific words or clauses in the line itself. Some students chose to discuss physical skills and then vocal skills, or vice versa. However, the most successful responses tended to come from students who managed to combine elements of physical and vocal skill to create a particular intended theatrical effect.

The least successful responses saw students list a range of physical and/or vocal skills, as if by rote, and not make reference to any aspect of these skills in detail. Similarly, students would

frequently write about aspects of vocal skills with confusion; they might, for example, refer to a fast tone or a quick pitch. Another common hallmark of the less successful responses was students writing without accuracy about their intended demonstration of a particular physical attribute and what this might communicate.

### **Question .3**

This question asked students to explain how they might make use of the performance space and interact with another performer to create a specified effect in a performance of the printed extract. The question specifically focused on a short, shaded part of the printed extract.

Examiners reported that this question was answered reasonably well. Many of the most successful responses saw students contextualise the shaded extract with knowledge and understanding of the characters at that point in the whole selected extract, including precise details which outlined the required attitudes, relationships, creation of comedy or sympathy, as appropriate, with detailed practical exemplification. Choices made about demonstration of acting skills were generally appropriate and were supported by exemplification from the text. In most cases the decisions made and suggestions provided would work towards creating a coherent interpretation of the character in the text as a whole.

The less successful responses required greater clarity or precision in their proposals or only focused on a small section of the shaded extract. Whilst there is no requirement to give written consideration of every line of dialogue (although some students did, in fact, adopt this method), there is a need to give consideration to the dramatic action and content of the whole of the shaded extract.

Some students were able to offer a clear description and explanation of their use of acting skills and how they might interact with another performer, but there was also, in general, less of a sustained focus on how these elements would combine to achieve the stated effect. Similarly, a significant number of students wrote about the positioning of the characters in specific stage positions. Whilst this was fine to help create a mental image of the position of the characters, it was often stated or implied that these stage positions had inherent meaning or significance, which could not be credited. Another common error was for students to write about the 'proxemics' between two characters, but without clarity or a clear understanding of the use of this term or the dynamics of two performers on stage. A smaller number of students adopted a third person view of the printed extract and seemed to be writing from the perspective of a director or audience member, which did not help them to successfully engage with the demand of the question.

### **Question .4**

This was an optional question in which students were assessed on their knowledge and understanding of the set text, with a focus on their interpretation of a stated character in the printed extract and the play as a whole.

The overwhelming majority of students chose to answer Question .4 instead of Question .5.

Examiners reported that students who had managed their time well generally answered this question successfully.

There were many different ways in which students approached the structure of their response, illustrating that there are many routes to highly effective answers. Some students chose to first focus on the printed extract and discuss aspects of the characterisation within it, and then make reference to other parts of the play, or vice versa. Some students attempted to make links between moments in the printed extract and elsewhere in the play. No method was deemed to be more appropriate than another; the most successful responses were united by their reference to a

diverse range of acting skills and a consistent focus on an explanation to support all the choices made. There were some highly creative and imaginative responses which demonstrated original thinking. Students who were able to apply their own knowledge and understanding from their practical study and consider how they might approach their own characterisation tended to do very well.

Less successful responses saw students write cursorily about wider contextual considerations surrounding the play or failed to recognise that the question was focused on how a character might be interpreted using acting skills. It was evident that a significant number of students had a 'pre-prepared response' and tried to offer a social/cultural/historical critique of the play itself, and thus lost focus on how a character in the printed extract might be approached in performance.

A significant number of students, having written extraneous detail in Questions .1 and .2, evidently ran out of time when answering this question, and submitted an incomplete response which impacted adversely on their mark.

### **Question .5**

This was an optional question in which students were assessed on their knowledge and understanding of the set text, with a focus on their chosen design skills in reference to the printed extract and the play as a whole.

A minority of students chose to answer Question .5 instead of Question .4. This question tended to be very well answered.

Examiners reported that there were some confident answers relating to set design for *Blood Brothers*. Students understood the need to represent the late 1960s Liverpoolian setting of the play and did so by referencing Willy Russell's intentions to create an 'open stage with 2 semi-permanent areas: the Lyons' house and the Johnstone's house with the area in between the 2 houses acting as street scenes, park scenes.' Students who were able to give precise detail about the use of levels for actors to sit on to create doorsteps or kerbs outside Mrs Johnstone's house, for example, tended to provide design ideas that were both practical and relevant to the extract requirements and the play as a whole.

Many students outlined creative ideas for set changes elsewhere in the play such as Mrs Lyons' house to indicate the contrast in social class clearly to the audience. Suggestions of a chandelier or solid gold ornaments in the Lyons household were however a touch too opulent.

Designs for set in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Noughts and Crosses* were often very creative and highly sensitive to context and performance style.

In general, examiners reported that responses which focused on lighting would have benefitted from greater technical detail in terms of intensity, positioning and focus.

Costume was another popular design option for *The Crucible* in this question. For example, a student wrote lucidly about costume and make-up ideas for Proctor and Abigail. The style of costumes and their loose cut and fit and modest length were outlined in sympathy with the late 17<sup>th</sup> Century Puritan setting. Colours (shades of brown and grey) were used with authentic fabrics such as cotton, linen, leather and wool.

Less successful responses to this question tended to offer a general description of what an audience might see on stage, and attempt to give an aesthetic sense of the play in performance but without substantial reference to elements of theatrical design and how this might be achieved.

**Section C**

Students had seen a wide range of productions (both digital/streamed and live) including: *The Woman in Black*, *Blood Brothers*, *The Curious Incident of The Dog in The Night-Time*, *Our Town*, *The Play That Goes Wrong*, *The Comedy About A Bank Robbery*, *Brighton Rock*, *Pink Mist*, *Jekyll and Hyde*, *Macbeth*, *The Tempest*, *Things I Know To Be True*, *Billy Elliot: The Musical*, *War Horse*, *Metamorphosis*.

There was no correlation between the quality of responses seen and whether that production had been seen live or digitally/streamed.

Students wrote with genuine enthusiasm for the work they had seen, and had evidently seen work that was moving, funny, thought-provoking, scary or technically astonishing. Students' sense of enjoyment of the theatrical experience was palpable, and centres are to be commended for their efforts in facilitating students' attendance at live theatre performances.

It was a genuine and frequent pleasure to read responses which were devoid entirely of cynicism and offered a sincere and coherent analysis and evaluation of the work seen.

Examiners reported that, in general, students were more successful at describing what they had seen in performance than analysing or evaluating the effects of this. There was also a correlation between detailed and precise descriptions and analysis and evaluations that were similarly well exemplified.

The questions in this section are optional, with students choosing to answer one of the three presented.

The questions assess students' knowledge and understanding of theatre via their description of the skills they have seen in performance **and** their analysis and evaluation of the work of others.

**Question 11**

This question was focused on acting skills and was overwhelmingly the most popular choice in this section.

Students wrote enthusiastically and passionately about the productions that they had seen in order to explore the interpretation of the role(s) performed. It was clear when students had studied the play before and/or after their visit/streamed production as they were able to write comprehensively about extracts in their answer with knowledge and awareness of the wider context of the play. They also showed greater understanding of the special features or hallmarks of the style and genre of the production.

The strongest answers focussed on specific sections of the production rather than aiming to summarise the whole piece. They used practical examples illustrated with specific lines and with clear and accurate terminology and then evaluated the effect of the interpretation on the audience. The strongest answers were able to integrate evaluative and analytical verbs throughout their responses.

The less successful responses tended to almost ignore the question and its focus and instead offered what felt like a pre-prepared summary of the production as a whole. These answers tended to include lengthy paragraphs of often entirely extraneous detail which did not fully engage with the demand of the question itself.

### **Question 12**

This question was focused on lighting design and was seen fairly infrequently.

Examiners reported that, though this question was seen infrequently, most strong responses focused on *The Woman in Black*. The production was very well-suited to the question with its frequent changes of lighting state and a wide range of techniques used specifically to create mood and atmosphere. The use of the gauze and the impact of lighting it in different ways were fully understood alongside references to specific types of lanterns and their angles and intensities.

### **Question 13**

This question was focused on set design and was the least popular choice in this section.

As with the preceding lighting question, although responses to this question were very infrequent, the most common responses focused on one play, *The Curious Incident of the Dog In The Night-Time*. Again, this production was well-suited to the question and students were able to write about how the set and aspects of set design had been deliberately calculated to offer an insight into the characters and situation, including the condition of the leading character in the play. The use of hidden boxes, a floor which dropped, and a very flexible set helped students make successful reference to moments of mood and atmosphere.

## **Mark Ranges and Award of Grades**

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results Statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.

## **Converting Marks into UMS marks**

Convert raw marks into Uniform Mark Scale (UMS) marks by using the link below.

[UMS conversion calculator](#)