

# ‘Tricks of the Trade’

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## 8 What is this performance about?

Two actors are devising a show when an audience arrives unexpectedly. Their play is not ready to be shown to the public but they decided to share their play making process with the audience. The actors explore five starting points from which to make a play; Theme, Script, Found Story, Personal Story and an Issue. They demonstrate diverse theatrical styles by exploring one scene in different genres by playing it as a straight piece of with a Shakespearian sword fight, then in contemporary language complete with cell-phone bullying and finally as a fun spoof on action heroes in a superhero wrestle.

As they work through the various starting points the actors experiment with ways to create character, discover the techniques of improvisation, physicalise the script and explore theatrical transitions, props, musical scores and possibilities for research. This is all hugely entertaining as the performers use their extraordinary physicality and diverse skills to create dynamic and educative theatre.

## 9 Devising starting points that are explored

### **Theme**

The theme explored of 'Love and Loss' is explored through a segment that begins with a Hollywood director listing his production requirements for his \$10 million dollar movie. This theme continues to be explored through the rest of the performance.

### **Script**

The chosen script is a scene between Hermia and Helena from Midsummer Night's Dream. Paper tubes are used as swords when the two young lovers do battle. The intentions of the characters in this scene are then explored in two different genres; contemporary and action hero.

### **Found Story**

In the Found Story segment 'The Sea of Stories' by Salman Rushdie is adapted into a piece of theatre through analysis of character creation and an innovative use of props combined with madcap comedy.

### **Personal Story**

A personal story of a person assisting at the scene of an accident is physicalised through acrobatics, sound and movement.

### **Issue**

In this segment researching content and sourcing soundtracks for devised theatre is explored through transforming the audience into 'google'. Issues from which to make theatre are discussed and 'Surveillance' is explored through a play for surveillance cameras in New York.

## 10 Activities for students to explore

## Themes

A theme can be any idea that you use as a provocation – to get you started and to add a clear focus or through line to your work. You could use something very general such as Love, Friendship or War. Or maybe you could choose something relatively prescriptive and specific such as ‘Mothers and Daughters’ or ‘Cradle to the Grave’. Or perhaps you could choose a theme that is more open to interpretation such as ‘The Madness of Crowds’, ‘East meets West’, ‘Inside Out’, or ‘Running on Empty’. Your theme could be a quotation or a song or play title, maybe something like ‘All’s Well that Ends Well’ or ‘As You Like It’.

This way of devising drama can be like a collection or a medley of ideas on one theme or topic. It is a style of work that involves the juxtaposition of small scenes or vignettes around one central idea. The process is like that of making a montage, the composing of pictures from miscellaneous elements or a collage – a collection of related things. It allows the play builders to take a kaleidoscopic view of a topic and show multiple reflections.

- 11 Brainstorming - Choose a theme and in a group of four or five students do some brainstorming work on your chosen theme. Think about how many sources of information you can think of about your topic. Include poems, plays, songs, films, books, short stories, historical events, newspaper and magazine articles, pictures, famous quotations, and advertisements, even conversations you may have had or overheard.
- 12 Research - Make a list of the places where you might find this information. The library will of course be your best starting place. Try a google search on the topic. Also look at the Epic library information service and investigate the opposing viewpoints section. Think of the magazines, dictionaries, and encyclopaedia. However, do not stop at the library. You can do interviews, visit video shops, go through the phone book.
- 13 Devising using conventions –
  - Freeze Frame - Make a sequence of four freeze frames each seeking to convey an image that you developed from the chosen theme.
  - Chorus of Voices – Create a vocalisation from the freeze frame images. Use words sparingly, focus on sounds to create the sound-scape.
  - Chorus of Movement – use flocking to create a movement sequence.
  - Monologue – devise a monologue exploring the thoughts of one character, at a decisive moment that relates to your theme, to convey mood.
  - Conscience Alley – explore a devised and sequenced response of the whole group surrounding a character – make one physical and one verbal offer each.
  - Flash-forward – Improvise a moment 10 years in the future
  - Comedy – Collect jokes on the topic, even if they are ‘politically incorrect’ or use ‘black humour’. The fact that they are discriminatory or cruel can make a point very well if used in the right context.

## **Script**

A dramatic script can be a great provocation for devised work. It is not a matter of interpreting the already existing work but using it as an inspiration for your own creation. You can play with all the dramatic elements, role, time, space, focus, tension and action. The elements can be changed, highlighted or downplayed. The aim is to create something new and fresh and of your own invention.

- 1 Telling an old story in a new way can show that story in quite a new light. Consider telling your story using any of the following genres or styles; Kiwi style, horror, mystery, soapie, American, opera, musical, news, kids show, documentary, melodrama or any others. Discuss these possibilities.
  - 2 You can explore narrative. The structure of such a segment has a traditional story shape. Ensure you create a moment for each individual to shine rather than focus on one protagonist.
  - 3 Try playing the script in gibberish. What do you discover?
  - 4 Exploring the characters- choose a character and think about why your character acts the way they do and explore their motivation. How are you going to manifest that? Think in terms of voice and movement and develop idiosyncrasies, or particular characteristics and behaviour that distinguish your character from the others. You may choose to research the characters by using other resources and use your powers of observation to help you find ideas that support your imaginative choices.
  - 5 Write an interview between at least a couple of characters that relates to the ideas in the piece. Read these interviews and see if there are any moments that you could use in your piece.
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- 1 Use the alter ego device to explore the motivation and conscience of the characters.
  - 2 Explore conflict. Choose a scene that has a source of conflict then try exploring the ideas – try fighting and making up. Make the fight as extreme as you can so that you are playing it at a 10 on a scale of 1 to 10. Now try playing the scene at a rate of 3 or 7 so you explore the depth of the conflict.



## Found Story

Devising from a Found Story gives you several advantages; you can choose the story that you wish to adapt, you already have a structured piece of work to dramatise and the characters will be outlined ready for you to interpret. You also have the opportunity to interpret the story so as it communicates a message that is important to you. Experiencing this process will also help you understand how to shape any Drama in a conventional way as most stories have a clear structure.

- 14 Brainstorming - Create groups of about four or five students. Each person in the group writes down three story ideas, which have personal relevance or appeal. Short stories, poems, songs, items from the news, are all fruitful sources, as well as legends and fairy stories. Consider the following questions and think about how you might like to present and interpret your story.  
Is it an idea that lends itself to dramatisation?  
If you know plays that deal with part, or all, of your idea, was it an interpretation you liked? Could more, or something different, be done with it?
- 15 Selecting the story - Discuss your story ideas and select one the group wants to work on. Consider exactly what you want to emphasise, what you might add, what you will expand, what you will leave out. Decide whether the play is to highlight a serious theme, or whether you just want to make people laugh. Perhaps you want to do both of these, or something else altogether. It helps to write a sentence that clarifies the group's intentions.
- 16 Key Elements of the Structure - The key elements are the important details like the setting, which is the time and place of the action, and how they will affect the action. Think about what parts of the action belong in the exposition, and what parts to the complication of the action and the climax. Decide when the main conflict takes place so you can build the dramatic tension. The denouement needs to resolve the conflict. Divide the story into scenes. The scene breakdown is the planning of what will occur in each scene from beginning to the end of the performance, and which characters will be in each scene. Do this through listing the essential scenes and selecting the order of the scenes.
- 17 Improvising - The next stage of the devising process is to improvise every scene, concentrating on the narrative. Improve the scenes as you work. Be aware of building interesting characters that contribute to the narrative. This process of improvising, discussing and trying again is hard work, but preparation is always an important factor in a successful performance.

- 18 Refining Dialogue -Only when you have each scene as you would like it do you write down the dialogue. Now you can edit and select lines that work well. For some of the characters, think in terms of establishing a speech idiom, which is a particular personal language style, so that the characters are distinguished from each other. Perhaps your character has a love of long words, or a stutter, or perhaps you have a habit of repeating what someone else has just said. The character may use jargon or speak in a dialect. For example, your character may have a favourite saying or repeated response, such as 'oh yes, yes, I see.'

## **Personal Story**

Using a Personal story as a provocation or starting point can be a powerful way to create drama. You must be wary though, that the story is one you want to expose to public scrutiny and that you choose material that is suitable to explore.

- 19 Facing Challenges- Think of an incident that involved successfully facing a challenge. It could be a physical challenge or an emotional challenge. Try to recall the elements that made the event memorable. Were there any surprises? In pairs, tell your personal story to a partner.  
After you have shared your stories, discuss whether the stories contained elements that could be dramatised or perhaps they portrayed certain relationships that contributed to the drama of the stories. Are they suitable for extended improvisations or play-building?
- 20 Freeze Frames - Now join with another pair. Share your stories. Choose one of the four stories you wish to focus on. Make a freeze frame of a significant scene in the life of one of the people in your shared story. The image could reflect anything that tells us something important about that person.  
Then show this to the rest of the class who will read the freeze frame in terms of space and relationships.
- 21 Improvisation: Now work in pairs again. Each person is the person who was the focus of the freeze frame that you created in a group of four. Discusses the hopes, dreams and fears of the person. What challenges do you face? What do you want to achieve? Write one line that could be the inner action for this character – for instance, 'I will succeed at all costs', 'She will see – I can do it without her'. Chose another character that could be in the scene and take turns at playing the two different roles using the one line as a motivation for the character. Don't feel any obligation to be true to the original story and characters – you are now interpreting the ideas and devising your own drama. Discuss your experience.
- 22 Poems - Each of you now has to write a six line poem from the point of view of your character. Think of expressing their inner thoughts. Once you have finished writing, join up with some the others from your previous group of four and one other group so now there are about eight in your group. Share your poems by

reading them aloud.

You are going to create an improvised choral poem by inter-mingling the individual poems. It doesn't matter that you are joining two different groups as they are still on the one theme of 'facing challenges'. Find a strong beginning and a strong end line for the poem and then in between these two lines anyone can say any line they feel fits next. You don't have to say every line and you can repeat lines like a chorus or echo lines if you wish. Stand in a tight bunch so that you are very aware of the people around you. Someone says the first line and then the others, using timing and awareness of the others' breathing, contribute an appropriate line from their own poem, until the person with the last line feels it is right to say it. You can record it if you like as it will change every time you do it.

Now that you have improvised this piece of choral work you may like to polish it a little before performing it for the other groups. Consider any other aspects you might like to keep, or change. Were there any lines that you could repeat to create a certain effect? Were there any lines that more than one person could say at the same time? Could you use percussion instruments to expand your poem, to create mood and rhythms? Could you introduce symbolic movement?



## **Issue**

Theatre can be a tool to highlight oppression, to expose prejudice and discrimination. Theatre can scrutinise an issue and present conflicting opinions about that issue. Agit-prop theatre, agitation propaganda theatre, is theatre that presents a political point of view and 'agitates' for that point of view. In agit-prop, the politics, or message, are more important than the theatrical form, so it can easily become just a way of preaching, rather than genuine theatre. However, generally people prefer to be presented with the evidence on both sides of an issue, so that they can make up their own minds, rather than being preached at. You need to remember to present both sides of the issue, even though you will naturally stress the point you want to make.

Decide on your issue. You could explore issues such as bullying, gossip, discrimination, racism, homophobia, old age, poor pay and conditions at work, child abuse.

- 1 Work out a possible structure for a short play that illustrates the issue that concerns you. You could use the traditional narrative shape of exposition, complication, climax and denouement. Think of a main event that you could build the piece around. Perhaps a more episodic structure of short related scenes would tell your story better.
- 2 Do a pair, share exercise posing a challenging question about the issue. Firstly try to reach consensus, think aloud, try to solve the problem and make predictions. Then try one of the pair playing devils advocate. Write down as many arguments as you can to represent both sides of the issue. What reflections does this exercise generate?
- 3 Create an advertisement. Sell the topic using jingles, hype, dance, bold characters and all the other techniques television advertisements use.
- 4 Create a ritual to give your work symbolic reverence.
- 5 Come up with a series of 'one liners' that express an opinion on the topic. Try to make a montage poem with these, use repetition, chorus and echoes for emphasis.
- 6 Look at children's rhymes and well known songs. Can you borrow any lines or rewrite the piece so that it serves your purpose?

- 7 In your play, try using some, or all, of the following techniques that were used by the political theatre practitioner, Bertolt Brecht.
- Narrate, rather than act, part of the story. Have the actors step out of character and explain, or narrate events to the audience.
  - Use songs to comment on the action. Present the lyrics for the audience to see.
  - Have actors come onto the stage carrying a placard announcing the time and place, or giving any other information.
  - Speak the stage directions to remind the audience it is a piece of theatre.
  - Use chorus to sing or chant.
  - Retell the story with several different endings.
  - Try to use some humour. This could be contextual, verbal, visual. Remember that no matter how serious the issue is, the alienation that is required to help the audience think about the issue can often be achieved with humour. Jokes, even 'sick' jokes can make a point.



## 23 The performers

**Beth Kayes-Artistic Co-ordinator/Performer** Beth trained at Auckland's Theatre Corporate Drama School in 1986 and went on to train at the Circus Space (London), with Phillipe Gaulier, Theatre de Complicite and at Desmond Jones School of Mime. From 1991-1995 Beth performed with Australian company **Legs on the Wall** and toured with them nationally and internationally performing in the award-winning show *All of Me* and in acclaimed aerial work *Homelands* which was televised nationally by the ABC for the millennium broadcast. With the **Australian Dance Theatre** she performed *House Dance* on the Opera House sail-also for the ABC 's millennium broadcast. In 1995 she formed **Co. Theatre Physical** and has created and performed in numerous shows including *Tailing Out* (for the closure of Newcastle's Steelworks), *Miss Havisham's Dream* and *Wonder Alice Wonder* which both toured to Australian and International festivals. She has now based the company in Auckland and has presented *A House Across Oceans* at the **Silo Theatre** in March 2004 and at **The Herald Theatre, THE EDGE for Ignite Festival, 2005, Christchurch Festival '05, Nelson Festival '05 and Fuel Festival '06**. She played Lady Macduff and a Witch in **Pandemonium Theatre's** production of *Macbeth* in 2003 at the Silo Theatre. She has performed in the film *Perfect Creature*, in T.V series *Outrageous Fortune* and in short film *The Lost One*. In 2007 she has worked on the creative development of *Love, Sex and Activism* and has co-created and performed in Co.Theatre Physical's new show *Tricks of the Trade* which toured schools in N.S.W in May and currently tours New Zealand schools. She teaches *Devising Theatre* to actors at Unitec Performing Arts School.

**Eve Gordon-Performer/Co-deviser** recently graduated from Unitec Performing Arts School and has since been working as an actor, producer and costume-maker in film and theatre. She has been involved in many short films and played lead roles in independent feature films *Anguish* and *Motu*. She has produced films:- *Motu*; *Lively Lovely and the Rest*; and *Peas* and she creates and performs experimental films. She was recently funded by Creative New Zealand to produce and create a new experimental film. Her recent stage credits include:- *How Charming is Divine Philosophy*; *The Bomb*; and *iS* – an existential musical comedy. She devised and performs in **Co. Theatre Physical's** *Tricks of the Trade* which has toured schools in Auckland and N.S.W. She is constantly training to progress her circus skills and is a singer in an Auckland-based band. She has been working with costumes and costume design for over ten years, starting out with over 100 costumes for the Smokefree Stage Challenge and most recently, *How Charming is Divine Philosophy*. She has costumed eight plays in the last four years, a SuperHero film and a dance film *The Moth* by Campbell Farquhar.



## 24 The process

Our work combines 'Le Coq' style characterisations with contemporary circus, traditional narrative and text. Beth Kayes wrote the concept for the show so there was a clear structure and strong stylistic and design ideas from which to begin to make the show. Eve Gordon joined the process and the pair then used research and improvisation to choreograph and devise/write the show. The play evolved from improvisations which were scribed and then re-written and refined. Choreographies stemmed from our base of balance acrobatics, mime and movement. Eve sourced and engineered all of the music and sound effects as well as providing important research. Our focus was also on comedy so we created characters and scenarios specifically to be funny.

## 25 Drama Components - Elements Conventions and Techniques and Technologies

### Elements

Drama, by definition, must contain a number of key elements. These elements are the ingredients or the building blocks in any piece of drama and provide a foundation for drama. The elements are 'terms' that you can use to analyse and describe what you do in drama. These terms give you a common language so you can talk about ways of creating, developing and appreciating the drama that you see. Understanding these elements of drama provides keys to the dramatic meaning.

There are many different ways to categorise these key elements into a model. One of the first recorded attempts is probably in Aristotle's work 'The Poetics', which he wrote in about 300bce. He saw the key elements as plot, character, thought, diction, melody and spectacle.

The NZ drama curriculum states that the Elements of Drama are an actor performing a **ROLE** in a **TIME** and **SPACE** playing an **ACTION** directed to a **FOCUS** creating **TENSION**. So in drama, a role is placed in a setting of time and space and combines with action, tension, and focus to create dramatic meaning.

Elements of Drama		How the element is used in “Tricks of the Trade”
<b>Role</b>	Role involves stepping into the place of another person, sustaining belief in that position, and representing that person’s relationships and point of view.	This performance has the primary roles of the characters of the two ‘actors’ who are trying to devise a play – these actors in turn play multiple roles while they try to devise a play.
<b>Focus</b>	Focus is used to describe the central event, character, theme, issue, or problem of a drama. It is a term used to describe the essence of the dramatic action.	The focus is the devising of a new performance
<b>Action</b>	Action is what each person in role is doing and thinking, alone and with others. It’s what happens in the drama.	Devising a play, trying out various starting points, roles and situations.
<b>Tension</b>	Tension is the force that drives the drama. It’s created by obstacles that those in the drama have to overcome.	The tension is created by the need to find a successful starting point for the devised show. The structure is episodic so each self contained segment has it is own dramatic shape.
<b>Time</b>	Time is when the drama is set. Dramas can have an open time frame or use an abstraction of time.	This piece takes place in ‘real time’ but as it jumps from scene to scene it also switches times – ie Elizabethan, contemporary, fictional.
<b>Space</b>	Space is where the dramatic action takes place.	The space is a rehearsal room but it is transformed into many fictional spaces as the drama unfolds.

## Conventions

Conventions are ways of working or strategies that we use to structure and sequence or frame dramatic action. We use conventions to explore meaning, deepen understanding, or add impact in drama work.

There were many conventions used in this drama, and this list is only some of them.

- 1 Chorus of movement
- 2 Chorus of voices
- 3 Direct address
- 4 Breaking the fourth wall
- 5 Multiple Roles
- 6 Stylised props (simplistic and symbolic)
- 7 Sound tracking/scape
- 8 Narration
- 9 Internal monologue
- 10 Flash forward /flash back
- 11 Music to create transitions between scenes
- 12 Clowning - Slapstick physical comedy
- 13 Physical theatre
- 14 Masks
- 15 Shakespearean Language – blank verse
- 16 Asides
- 17 Mimed action
- 18 Mock fighting
- 19 Indicated costume
- 20 Curtain call

## Techniques

Techniques are the use of voice, facial expression, gesture and movement to achieve a specific purpose or effect.

Listed below are aspects of specific techniques that were explored in this performance

- 1 slow motion
- 2 physical comedy
- 3 acrobatics
- 4 balances
- 5 singing

## Theatre Technologies

This is the equipment that helps to create, present, explain, document, analyse, view, interpret, or learn about dramatic works. It could include set design, puppets, masks, lighting, props, sounds, costumes or recording equipment.

The production elements were kept very simple and yet are very effective. It is stylised realism. The set is made from three suitcases, cardboard boxes and tubes. There is a little wheelbarrow, some books, a simple wrestling ring made with bamboo and elastic, some fabric and signs, the actors use masks and simple indicated costumes. A very important production element was the use of recorded music on a stereo that was operated by one of the actors as part of the performance. This assisted with setting of atmosphere and creating transitions as well providing sound background to the action.

### **Using Drama Components to understand the devising process.**

1 A list of some of the conventions used in 'Tricks of the Trade' has been provided for you. Work through the list remembering the specific way each of the conventions was used in the performance. Describe the moment in detail giving a clear example.

2 You have been given a list of the technologies used in this production. Go through the list and categorise them into set, set dressing, props and costumes.

3 Use the IDEA acronym to discuss the use of the elements of drama in this production.

**Identify the element** – define the element, for example give the definition of role.

**Describe the use of the element** – for example describe exactly what roles were in this production and how role was used

**Example** – give a clear example of the use role – describe it in detail – choose a specific moment to describe and discuss

**Analyse the effectiveness of the use of this element** – evaluate the decisions made.

You can work your way through the six elements using this acronym to help structure and guide your thinking.

4 Write review of the performance.

In the first paragraph write an introduction that puts the production in context. Discuss what the piece was about, the performance style and purpose.

In the second paragraph discuss the use of the Elements of Drama.

In the third paragraph focus your ideas on the performer's use of techniques. Be specific and critical in your discussion. In the fourth paragraph describe specific moments when conventions were used effectively.

In the fifth paragraph discuss the technologies used in the production and reflect on their effectiveness.

In the sixth and final paragraph make evaluative statements as to the entertainment and educative value of this production.

## 26 Curriculum links

There are various measurable outcomes for student success through an opportunity to work intensely on this performance.

Devising drama is a core drama process that is assessed at all three levels of NCEA drama. The devising drama standards are (1.2 AS 90007; 2.3 AS 90301; 3.3 AS 90609.)

All Levels of NCEA Drama require students to respond to live theatre experiences in the external examinations (1.6 AS 90011; 2.6 AS90304; 3.6 AS90612.)

English links are possible as it defines five diverse ways to begin to build a play, story, novel, film script or poem.

Health and PE connections are through the highly physical style of the piece – balance acrobatics dance and movement.

