

Drama & Theatre

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A GUIDE TO... REPRESENTATION IN THE DRAMA CURRICULUM

Inside this guide

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Zawe Ashton in *Gone Too Far!*
at the Royal Court theatre,
photograph by Tristram Kenton

Representation in the Drama curriculum

by Susan Elkin

HELENA/BANKS



Anjana Vasan as Niru in Tanika Gupta's *A Doll's House* at the Lyric Hammersmith

Want more representation in your GCSE Drama plays? Wanting stories that all your students, regardless of background, can really identify with? Four new additional text options offered in Component 3: Theatre Makers in Practice by Pearson Edexcel (first examination in Summer 2022) may be your answer.

The list now includes *Antigone*, adapted by Roy Williams and *A Doll's House* adapted by Tanika Gupta, alongside *Gone Too Far!* by Bola Agbaje and *The Freezy* by In-Sook Chappell. All four are now published by Methuen Drama in its Plays for Young People series.

Pearson Edexcel is the UK's largest examining body. Working in partnership with The Royal Court and London Theatre

Consortium it has spent five years committedly looking for ways of decolonising the drama curriculum – thus the addition of these four plays by global majority playwrights.

mezze eade, one of the specialist advisors who has worked closely with Pearson explains 'The language changes all the time. At present we're using the term "global majority playwrights" although that may change in the future.' They explain that the 'BAME' label is no longer acceptable because it is insufficiently inclusive, and marginalises people by focusing on the negative word 'minority'.

A passion for inclusivity and diversity have driven the thinking from the start. In order to make this development as far-reaching as possible,

the following people have collaborated with Pearson Edexcel on this work alongside mezza eade: Yaz Zadeh of The Queer House; Romano Fello, participation manager at The Royal Court; and Jenny Sealey, CEO and Artistic Director of Graeae.

Choosing just four plays wasn't easy. Clea Wilcher, Pearson Edexcel's Chief Examiner for GCSE Drama wrote recently in *Drama and Theatre* that she and her colleagues spent summer 2020 reading 'what seemed like hundreds of plays' as they sought to 'select texts that met the demands of the GCSE qualification while engaging young people, not just in drama but in the world we all inhabit.'

Romana Fello stresses that these new texts do not usurp existing options. Rather it's a matter of 'work from the global majority [being] included so that young people can see all narratives are valued and that theatre is a viable career path for all.'

Pearson Edexcel has worked closely with the four playwrights and produced a range of bespoke resources to support teachers. These include new set text guides and fourteen films made by Representation in Drama. Each playwright is happy for their play to be used by students, regardless of their cultural background.

Sophocles' *Antigone*, adapted by Roy Williams

Antigone, written around 441 BC, was the third play in Sophocles' Theban plays trilogy. It has been translated and adapted many times including in opera, TV, film and spin-offs. The most famous of these was by Jean Anouilh, first staged in Paris in 1944 during the Nazi occupation.

Roy Williams' version dates from 2014 – a co-production between Derby Theatre, Pilot Theatre and Theatre Royal Stratford East before a national tour. He reworks the familiar Antigone story in a modern setting with military rule, traffic, menacing lights and all the fears of inner-city life. We are in Thebes and it's dark and dangerous. Surveillance cameras become gods. People get texts.

Tig's rule-defying brother has died and Creon, who owns a nightclub and rules the roost locally, will not allow her to bury him decently. Of course she becomes defiant and, of course, it doesn't end happily, although Williams changes Sophocles' ending.

Gamba Cole and Savannah Gordon-Liburd in *Antigone* during its 2014 tour



ROBERT DAV

Williams' dialogue is snappy, streetwise and totally convincing. Occasionally – as in Antigone's opening 'voice over' speech, we hear a hint of the verse form Sophocles wrote in (often translated into English in iambic pentameter). But for the most part Williams' characters sound very current, saying things like 'We caught her in the act. Just now, man' and 'It's her brother, Dad, she want to do right for him, that is all, where's the harm?' and 'I don't know if I can do that.' At other times Williams finds eloquent poetry in the patois which is often all done in monosyllables: 'And dead's you where you stand' for instance. There's a great deal here for students to discuss, and work on, in both Drama and English classes.

There are eight good parts in this gritty play, plus chorus which effectively becomes an ensemble, meaning you could make the cast bigger than the eleven it specifies.

Practical activities

- In pairs, improvise a scene in which one of you wants to do something that you know is right while the other uses power and influence to prevent you. For example, student A wants to report a crime she/he has witnessed to the police. Student B is, for whatever reason, determined to prevent this. Or Student A raises money for a charity and student B, for a reason of their own tries to stop the money going where it should. Think of your own scenario. Do it both ways so that you each improvise both roles.
- Actioning is finding a transitive verb to summarise the thought or emotion beneath each line or sentence in a play. Make sure the students have fully grasped that a transitive verb is one which involves an action being done to someone or something. Then choose a section of the play and get students, probably in small groups to 'action' it. In Creon's long speech in scene 2, for example: 'You lying wretch, each and every one (*recognises*) No mind, point is. I have summoned you here yeah cos I know I can count on each and every one of you (*flatters*). You proved yourselves soldiers and a half when you pledged loyalty to Lais (*reminds*) ...', and so on. Then ask the students to perform the speech according to the identified actions. There will of course be more than one resultant version.

Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* adapted by Tanika Gupta

Ibsen's denials notwithstanding, *A Doll's House* was a startling, forward-looking, 'feminist' play even when it premiered in Copenhagen in 1879. It explores repression within marriage.

Gupta's version, first seen at the Lyric Hammersmith in 2019, moves it to Calcutta in colonial India and presents Niru, a young Bengali woman married to Tom who is an English colonial bureaucrat and regards her as his exotic plaything. 'My Little Indian Skylark' and 'my little sweet-toothed fairy', he gratingly calls her.

Actually, of course, she's bright – arguably more intelligent than he is – and definitely more perceptive. As in Ibsen's original which it follows pretty closely, they appear to be idyllically happily married. But, because of the limitations of her background she is, in some ways, unworldly, and has borrowed money behind Tom's back to shore up his finances. He thinks it has come from her wealthy father. It is the unscrupulous money lender, Das, who triggers their undoing along

HELEN MARGANIS



Elliot Cowan as Tom and Anjana Vasana as Niru in Tanika Gupta's *A Doll's House* at the Lyric Hammersmith

with a family friend, Dr Rank.

This play is as topical as ever, despite its nineteenth century setting, because it explores in depth issues such as colonialism and racism which are still very much with us. Modern students will gasp in horror at the suggestion that Tom should never have married Nora because she's Indian – just kept her for his concubine as other British men in India do. Most will approve of the ending when she leaves him.

Gupta writes in her preface: 'I have long admired the play *A Doll's House* for its powerful portrait of how a young woman – Nora – breaks free from the shackles of a powerful marriage. Being of Bengali origin myself, steeped in the stories from my parents and grandparents of the history of Calcutta and the struggle for Indian independence, I transposed the setting... which opens the door to exploring an additional power dynamic. I wanted to pose the question – what happened to the women of India who were married to Englishmen?'

Gupta explains that unions between Europeans and local women were common in the 18th century and were the basis of Calcutta's Anglo-Indian or Eurasian community today. But by the 19th century, racial intolerance had kicked in and it was much rarer.

Practical activities

- As a whole class, brainstorm all the terms of endearment used by men to women that you can think of (Darling, Pet, Honey, and so on) while one student or the teacher jots them down on a whiteboard, or whatever's convenient at the front. Then, in smaller groups, talk about why they're irritating (or whether they are) and arrange the words in order of inappropriateness. Come back together as a whole group to discuss results. Why are there far fewer such terms used by women to men?
- For groups wishing to stage a full production of *A Doll's House* there are six meaty roles and lots of scope for some detailed voice work on both the Indian and English accents of the period.

Gone Too Far! By Bola Agbaje

Premiered at The Royal Court (upstairs) in 2007, this sharply observed play is set on a London housing estate. Issues of identity and culture dominate every word, deed and action, from the moment when two brothers from different continents pop along the street to buy a pint of milk, onwards. The tensions, occasional humour and real dangers are deftly caught. The girls, Paris and Armani are particularly interesting and there's plenty of discussion built very non-didactically into the text which uses rapid, naturalistic dialogue so that the sense of south London and all its diversity is very strong.

Respect is what everyone wants and demands but what do we mean by it and how is it earned? That is the question the play asks but it would also be a good starting point for a brainstorming activity before starting work on the play.

Gone Too Far! at the Royal Court in 2007



TRISTRAM KENTON

Another tension is that the nation is – as presented here – disunited. And everyone wants to be an individual. So how do you balance that with not wanting to stand out from the crowd? ‘Why? Why should I? I’m not you. I’m my own person, I’m sick of this. I just wanna be me. Don’t wanna be no one else. Let me be,’ declares (screams, probably) Yemi.

Gone Too Far! also makes it absolutely clear why the term ‘BAME’ is meaningless as teenagers whose families came from the West Indies, those who came direct from Africa and those from elsewhere in the world live alongside people of mixed race and other backgrounds. ‘You two are so dumb,’ says Armani in *Gone Too Far!* ‘We are all slaves, all of us from the West Indies. Dat why I don’t like African, cos they sold us off to da white man, and den stayed in Africa living as kings and queens, while all my ancestors had to work

Practical activities

- Work in pairs. Imagine you and your partner come from different backgrounds: family originally from overseas, religion, social class, income, housing, and so on. Try to encourage a completely imaginary scenario rather than using real life stories. Take turns to tell each other about one advantage – something really positive that your background brings.
- There are twelve parts for people of varying ages in *Gone Too Far!* Ideally they will be played by people of different backgrounds, and the list of characters details each person’s colour, accent and background. But the play is a work of imagination, and any young actor can be encouraged to inhabit any role if you choose to develop it towards a full production.

hard.’ Now there’s a potentially fascinating classroom talking point – although it would need handling with great care.

This play won the Laurence Olivier Award for Outstanding Achievement in an Affiliated Theatre in 2008, and Agbaje was nominated the same year for Evening Standard Most Promising playwright of the year.

There is also a film of *Gone Too Far!*, which was produced by Poisson Rouge Pictures and the BFI. Agbaje wrote the screenplay. It premiered at London Film Festival in 2013 and was released the following year.

The Free9 by In-Sook Chappell

SHETLAND ARTS



The 2018 Shetland Youth Theatre production of *The Free9*, as part of the National Theatre Connections festival

This play was written for National Theatre Connections, so potentially it has a big cast (nine plus a large-as-you-like ensemble who also play small roles). The production of *The Free9* by Jackson's Lane Transmission youth theatre was invited to the National Theatre's Dorfman Theatre as part of the 2018 festival.

The setting is more or less the present, and we begin and end in tyrannical, propaganda-infested North Korea where a delightfully mixed group of nine teenagers are, for different reasons, trying to escape by a circuitous route to the South, amid dangers, fears and horrors. It's nothing like as straightforward as simply dodging across the border. Gender issues are fundamental to this play and there is a gay subplot which helps to add depth and diversity as well as offering even more scope for drama teachers and their students.

These young people are the victims of propaganda. The play begins and ends with a TV broadcast in North Korea and, of course, they know very little about the world outside. One character talks about the work of the UN, which she has read about, but pronounces it 'un' because she has never heard it said. It would be interesting to get students individually or in small groups to reflect on

propaganda and to create some about the school or college and then share it with the class in the form of a quasi-TV broadcast.

Inspired by accounts of the Laos 9 and other very topical true child refugee stories, the play reflects the playwright's own gratitude that she arrived in Britain with nothing as a child herself and was shown compassion and given opportunities.

The playwright, who wanted to tell a specific North Korean story, asserts that professional productions must use south Asian actors but that for amateur/youth productions she simply wants people – who aren't depriving south Asian actors of work – to get into the roles imaginatively. 'You cannot play race' Chappell says, 'If you're a white person from Scotland then you can't be North Korean. Use your own accent but pronounce the Korean words correctly – Google is a good place to look that up.'

Practical activities

- Split the class into nine groups and give each a large sheet of paper with the name of one of the nine on it. Ask the groups to go through the text and extract all the information they can about their designated character. Mini, for example, hasn't experienced having to be on the streets, became a webcam girl from age 8, her father is a Chinese farmer, she breaks the rules, is fashion conscious... and so on.
- Work on the creative challenges of the play. Discussion points might include how to show the passage of time, dealing with images of self-harm and drugs in the play, and being sensitive about how to rehearse and present such material. Given that gender is part of the fabric of the play, how do you explore that balance if your group doesn't fit the one in the play? You could brainstorm the challenges to identify them as a way of starting this activity.

A final practical activity and competition

To celebrate the launch of this new representation initiative, Pearson Edexcel have created a hashtag campaign with a competition to engage your students:

- Gupta and Williams have reworked well-known plays in different settings. #IfIWere invites students and teachers to reimagine a play – its story, characters, settings and outcomes – from their own perspective in a 280-character Tweet, 200-word Facebook post or short recording.
- From *Macbeth* to *Of Mice and Men*, *Twelfth Night* to *The Crucible*, *Les Mis* to *The Lion King*, or

1984 to 100, imagine you are in the centre of your favourite show as if you were represented in the text. Would it be set in a different country? What would happen if you were the protagonist? What would your view of the world be?

- Share the result on social media using the hashtag #IfIWere, or by submitting via email, from 1 March 2022 onwards. Prizes are available for participating students and their schools, and winners will be announced in the Summer term of 2022. go.pearson.com/ifiwereTD

Useful links

- To read more about these new set texts, take a look at this article which appeared in *Drama & Theatre* at the time of their launch in 2021: <https://www.dramaandtheatre.co.uk/features/article/planting-the-seeds-of-diversity-pearson-s-new-gcse-set-texts>
- In the 100th issue of *Drama & Theatre*, Chief Examiner Clea Wilcher wrote an opinion column addressing concerns regarding cultural appropriation – referring in particular to *The Free9*. Read the column here: www.dramaandtheatre.co.uk/opinion/article/opinion-with-clea-wilcher
- Pearson Edexcel has produced support materials for these four new plays, you can find them at: <https://qualifications.pearson.com/content/dam/pdf/GCSE/Drama/2016/teaching-and-learning-materials/GCSE-Drama-C3-new-texts-resources-issue-1.pdf>
- To buy copies of the plays, visit the publishers at: www.bloomsbury.com



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