

AS LEVEL DRAMA 2011

Paper 8286/02

Written examination

Marker's report

General comments

Of the twelve plays listed in the syllabus answers were attempted for five: *Oedipus the King*, *Macbeth*, *The Miser*, *Oh What A Lovely War*, and *Metamorphosis*. No students attempted to answer the New Zealand or the Mediaeval Mystery/Morality Play questions, or questions on *Medea*, *The School for Scandal*, and *Much Ado About Nothing*.

A wide range of preparation was evident in this examination. Less-prepared students demonstrated some knowledge of basic plot, character names, and perhaps a scene or two. These responses sometimes spent valuable time cataloguing rote knowledge (about the author, publication, performance history, and/or plot) rather than clearly and directly addressing the question. Interestingly, a similar trait was displayed by well-prepared candidates; eagerness to display general knowledge of the play sometimes led responses away from relevance to the question.

Another challenge for candidates was the use of an OPC ('Overall Production Concept') in responses. Unless asked for, these ideas often distracted from more relevant ideas. This is true particularly of a play such as *Oh What A Lovely War*; answers about costume design that tried to include an OPC based in another era or location (not something the question actually required) threatened to make nonsense of the play's satire and cultural specifics.

Candidates who mustered (accurate) quotations from the text tended to write more focussed responses, but again there were hazards here. Some quotations were included regardless of relevance and some quotations were rendered inaccurately. The ability to recreate detail from plays depends on confident quotation of text; this year there were only a few candidates who displayed that confidence.

On the matter of detail, some very entertaining and descriptive work was achieved by students who wrote about their experiences with actual performances of the play in question. Whether these were their own staging of scenes, or as audience members for performance, the vivid and immediate sense of seeing a living piece of theatre helped some responses measurably.

Generally speaking, this points to the usefulness of imagination in drama, and in the study of drama. Responses where students were able to fully imagine acting a role, directing a production, designing costumes, or creating a set design were more often able to access marks at the higher end of the mark scheme. An inhabited and living sense of involvement with theatrical performance engendered higher marks than a rote knowledge of a play's basic elements.

Time management proved a challenge for some candidates in the two-answer format of the AS Drama examination. Often, a thorough and engaged response to the first question answered was followed by a hasty and incomplete response to the second. Generally, diagrams and illustrations helped provide necessary clarity for responses; the general knowledge of stage partition and vocabulary was consistent and confident.

Above all, the ability to successfully imagine the practicalities of stage and performance and to describe those imaginings in evocative detail shone through in superior work in this examination. An imaginative approach that embraces and combines with confidence textual material, sketches, stage descriptions, actor awareness, and audience response seems to be the ideal to which students should aspire.

Comments on specific questions

Question 1 GREEK THEATRE

Oedipus The King

(c) This question focussed specifically on the working and creative relationship between a director and the two actors playing Oedipus and Tiresias. Superior responses drew on text and an understanding of the stakes in the scene to catalogue the decisions a director might make in bringing this dramatically ironic scene to life. While a few succeeded (and did so admirably), some candidates did not provide any textual support for their ideas, and quite often seemed to have little sense of the importance of the scene within the play as a whole. Some responses diverted into other areas of the director's purview; the set design and OPC. These were not strictly relevant to the question and did tend to distract the writer from addressing the interesting acting challenges inherent in Sophocles' writing.

As with all acting questions, those candidates who specified voice, body, and movement in their responses were able to access the upper ranges of the mark scheme.

(d) Answers that were rewarded at the higher end of the scheme exhibited two things primarily: knowledge of the text at the conclusion of *Oedipus the King*, and a sense of development in the performing of Oedipus' agonies. Less substantial responses tended to get stuck on a single idea (about blood and pain frequently) and without textual support had little else to say. An awareness of the stakes for Oedipus and for the realities of his tragic fall gave some answers real imaginative power. Any response that discussed both physical and mental/emotional suffering as well as giving some perspective on the challenges for an actor portraying states at the extreme of human suffering scored well here.

Question 3 SHAKESPEAREAN DRAMA

Macbeth

(c) Few students attempted this question, suggesting that detailed textual knowledge of Macbeth's soliloquies might have been lacking. Those students who did attempt it provided little detailed textual support but did display decent knowledge of the plight Macbeth faces and some of the play's relevant plot points. But a general lack of enjoyment in helping an actor find the riches in Macbeth's speeches seemed to prevail. The sense that acting and directing even very intense and dramatic material can be fun was absent. An understanding of the power and social stakes in the play's story arc was in evidence, but how that can be used to help an actor shape a performance was, again, a missing element.

(d) There were many and varied responses to the challenge of setting Macbeth in the present day. Most were entertaining and well-justified, but many also threw up contradictions and absurdities that would ill-befit any actual production of the play. This left many responses feeling theoretical and half-formed, and begging questions of environment, power, and appropriateness. Any OPC that moves the era and location of a play must include ideas for how the play's text will thus be altered, too. For instance, a Mafia/gangland setting may seem to be an appropriate setting for the violence of the play, but it leaves the pressing issues of broad territories and great powers (not to mention magical/supernatural forces and the vocabulary of ancient Scotland) up in the air. Diagrams, when used, were generally clear and helpful, although often showed little thought about the multiple demands of the play's many and varied settings.

Question 4 COMEDY OF MANNERS

The Miser

(c) The role of Harpagon the patriarch is some distance from most students' life experience, but their ideas about playing his escalating frustrations and paranoia proved to be interesting, entertaining, and well-developed. There seemed to be a good general understanding of the plot and stakes of the play and, although there was little direct quotation, some telling detail was discussed. Molière's comedy was generally well-understood, particularly in terms of acting performance and appropriate style for the genre of farce.

As with all acting questions, those responses which specified voice, body, and movement were able to access higher-end marks.

- (d) This set and lighting design question gave students the opportunity to use illustrations and sketches to bolster their ideas. These were generally well-employed, with direct applicability to plot and character requirements. Some superior responses even took into account elements such as time of day and the financial standing/status of Harpagon and family. Any indication within a response of the practical demands of farce (especially the movement of actors demanded by particular scenes), or of ways to help clarify storytelling for the audience, led to more interesting and rewarding answers. Some better responses noted that lighting can contribute greatly to mood and atmosphere.

Question 5 TWENTIETH CENTURY THEATRE

Oh What a Lovely War

- (a) This question about costume design and time and place seemed to be unnecessarily challenging for some respondents. Students tried to bring into their responses an OPC they had perhaps prepared or discussed during the year. Any OPC that moves the setting of the play to another time and place made answering the question very difficult. The question as written specified the time and place(s) of the play's intended setting, not a setting that departed from it. Given that, some attempts were made to explore the many possibilities for costuming an effective production. These responses showed knowledge of wartime culture and society, and acknowledged the bleak humour of the piece.
- (b) The large cast of this production is one of its great charms and challenges. The few responses to this question struggled to take into account the possibilities of a mass cast and the spectacle of actors in numbers. Candidates needed to give some indication of how bodies on a stage can communicate ideas about community, society, war, and the scale of suffering and involvement.

As with all directing/acting questions, those responses which specified voice, body, and movement were able to access the upper bands of the mark scheme. When voices and bodies are used in ensemble the cumulative power (to overwhelm, to impress, to convince) is considerable. How a director could marshal that power in varied and inventive ways was at the centre of this question. An understanding of the play's bleak satire helped some responses explore the key scenes in detail.

Metamorphosis

- (c) This question asked students to focus on the physical aspect of acting the lead role. Thoughtful responses included the actor's voice in this definition, and also were sensitive to the gradual development of Gregor's transformation. This question was answered well and with enthusiasm for the most part. Good general and detailed knowledge of the text really helped give answers some breadth and interest. The obvious joy with which students inhabited the physical grotesqueries of Gregor's plight and his extreme rejection of his family and its values, made many answers a pleasure to read. The pithy, epigrammatic dialogue seemed to be memorable to respondents; there were more direct quotations used in answers to this question than any other.
- (d) Again, there was a good deal of enthusiasm for this question, although also a great deal of repetition in ideas for stage layout. The more idiosyncratic and detailed set designs received higher marks. An awareness of the practical demands and opportunities in creating a set that illuminates the interior and exterior life of the main character was a feature of some strong answers. Some students found ways to link their design elements to specific scenes and even some quoted text, contributing to observant and detailed answers. Another good feature was any attempt to create a set design that could stage both the psychological horror of Gregor's dilemma and the everydayness of the family's domestic space.