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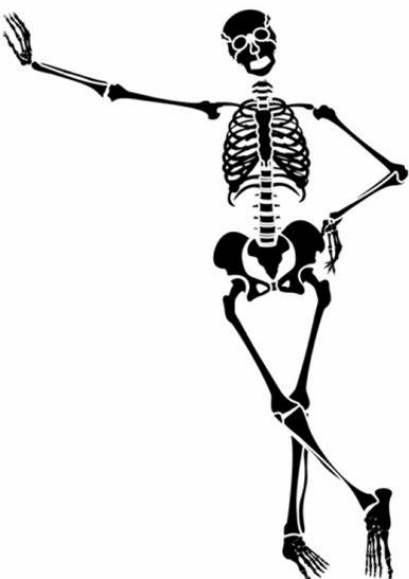
Emily Slinger

Memento Mori: Death is no Laughing Matter.

AQA Theatre Studies

A-Level Working Notebook

Bertolt Brecht



Roles:

Young Sarah Tarlow

Marjorie McCall

Narrator

Bingo Lady

Puppeteer

Actor/Demonstrator

Section 1

Rationale

Initially, we were inspired by the poem *Leisure* by William Henry Davies and the quote: “We are such stuff that dreams are made of”, from *The Tempest*. These stimuli made us question our life and ask ourselves if we as humankind are making the most of it? Specifically, the quote from *Leisure* reading, ‘We have no time to stand and stare’, stood out, as we began questioning the fleeting nature of time. We questioned whether humans disregard life’s worth and live it wastefully. Then we began thinking of old age and how those closer to death feel. We highlighted the sanctity of life and felt that a key message for our piece would be to assert a human gratitude for it. Due to regarding the theme of ‘life’ so much, we began to consider the opposing, ‘death’. Something about death alongside society was prominent and therefore, we questioned why the topic of death is ‘taboo’ in today’s world, whilst being the most common fact of life.



Dramatic Influences

We felt passionately about the themes of time, life and death and so pursued relative research. Firstly, we looked at art, specifically Salvador Dali’s piece, ‘Melting Watches’.

Here, we were *visually* shocked into acknowledging the reality of time and how it slips away unknowingly. Being human’s ourselves, we resonated with the fear of mortality. We wondered why it is that many of us fear our time ending and melting away like the images in the piece. The images looked like they were being pulled by something uncontrollable. We thought that this displayed the nature of death well, being a process that is inevitable and necessary; something that we shouldn’t fear. Therefore, we began forming the message promoting the acceptance of death in our piece.

We knew that life is something human’s value tremendously and wanted to investigate why. I researched the poem ‘On Living’ by Nazim Hikmet. I was inspired by the poem’s assertion that living a life by *not* ‘standing and staring’ gives man freedom, whatever the harsh conditions. Hikmet used the repetition of “Life is no laughing matter”, projecting to me the seriousness of life. I took something important from Hikmet’s use of poetry. He polemically and socially attacked the theme of living, which was inspiring. I liked how it was sincere and fearless, the way we aimed to portray our morbid theme. This such approach influenced ideas of Brecht and his political theatre and so we started to consider him to be our practitioner.



Brecht paraded political problems and conflicts through his epic theatre. We functioned as journalists, seeking news articles and stories based on our topic. Therefore, we found an article by Sarah Tarlow, a lonesome widow who worked through her archaeologist job during the grieving of her husband. This article affirmed our ideas towards death, as we explored how it affected one's perspective of life. We highlighted key phrases she used such as, "Even though I spend much of my waking life thinking about dead bodies, I do not find it depressing or ghoulish." We found this one stimulating as it restated the idea we initiated, about *not fearing death*.



Practitioner Research + Stylistic features

We researched Brecht's Lehstrucke plays: educative plays holding moral arguments, addressing everyone's opinions and beliefs collectively. We learnt that Brecht was inspired to educate the developing generations in the brewing communist society of 1930s Germany. From here, his focus took to a 'politics over plot' approach, using his theatre to stimulate his audience, one of our intentions.

We wanted to use Brechtian techniques of montage and subversion, so researched examples of chorus from *contrasting* time eras. We listened to 'Mack the Knife' by Threepenny Opera and Baz Lurnham's 'Everybody wants to wear sunscreen'. We were mostly inspired by Baz's piece and his dignified tone. Therefore, we felt inspired to create a similar narratorial voice for our piece, to convey principal messages.



To further understand Brecht, we looked into what influenced him, Japanese theatre. We researched Kabuki Theatre which comprised of exaggerated performance, formed during the Edo period, around 1603. This style inspired our character, Margorie McCall, who we melodramatised and developed into a caricature, to highlight her story. Their extravagant costumes and physical movement were very impressive and reminded us that we needed to incorporate light-hearted moments to contrast any dark topics surrounding death.

As well, this theatre highlighted the literal sense of Brecht's work, where the story, themes and characters were stated obviously. As his 'Boxing Ring Analogy' confirmed, he knew his audience were intelligent, alike to a sport's crowd; his audience were living amidst the political issues he was presenting. Therefore, we felt we wanted to project our piece through Brecht's naturalistic fourth wall, using placards, extravagant costuming and chorus as educative tools, pulling our audience into the present action.

Live Theatre

Working with Brecht meant it was hard to find live theatre productions of his to watch. Therefore, we utilised digital recordings, watching 'The Just Price of Flowers'. Use of music and narration in this play proved very impactful, we found it created an captivating opening, condensing the key messages for the audience. Use of paper props was also effective at



framing and dictating the story, allowing for visuality within the piece; from watching we found that visual aesthetics were important. 'The Just Price of Flowers', also used placards effectively which alongside narration, inspired us. The play through design, used monochrome, which resonated well with our theme of life and death and the developing juxtaposition of our message, overall, helping us refine our key ideas.

We also saw Macbeth by the RSC, which aided our thematic research. This production gave us a glimpse at surrealism, which we were previously inspired by when looking into Salvador Dali's 'Melting watches'. The subversion of eras and time distortion through theatre, was highly influential as thematic inspiration. Macbeth initiated our curiosity about time and mortality and it's fast-paced dynamic likened to the upbeat tempo of Brecht's work. Mostly, the theme of time inspired us, and the way they used movement motifs to present compelled us.

My Dramatic Aims

We aim for our piece to be fearless and dynamical, stimulating our audience to think. We want to build a juxtaposition between life and death, using our stage presence and life-like characters to bring our audience into the fleeting present. We want to engage our audience in life's thrill, showing this through laughter and joy. Contrastingly, we want to teach them to understand grief in these moments and acknowledge the inevitability of loved ones dying. We want to build a pace which balances both elements of life, ultimately making our audience want to live to the fullest whilst not fearing death.

I want to pursue the importance of life through my characters. As Young Sarah I aim to fulfil the sense of life's effervescence, influencing the audience to adopt a positive perspective. As Marjorie McCall, I aim to create energy and excitement about life's simplicities, building hope and making the audience laugh. As Narrator I aim to act with neutrality and dignity, in contrast to bigger emotions displayed by other characters.

Section 2

Devising Approach

To begin devising, we focused on creating a string of material, using physical movement and narration. We experimented with the idea of the presence and absence of death, using a gestural set of moves. After seeing *Lovesong*, by Frantic Assembly, we were inspired by the theme of time subversion, thinking it would pair well with our initial idea. To display this, we researched the different ages of man and their experiences of death. First we looked at the elderly generation. We explored the way those in retirement live their lives simply and perpetually. We adopted Brecht's episodic approach and developed a few scenes depicting elders differently; from a conversation between three old laundry ladies to retired friends at Bingo. We workshopped the Bingo scene further and it flourished. We looked at the static, automated motions of bingo playing, how it represents time ticking away. Combining these two concepts helped us fashion an arm motif which depicted the motion of time.

After having this idea we began exploring Marjorie's character and story. We experimented with the *Gestus* of Marjorie, seeing her bustling forward with turned out feet and hand on belly. We introduced the role of Marjorie's husband and created dialogue between the two to build humour. Through character creation, we found Marjorie become a strong comedic outlet, inspiring us to experiment with *Spaß*. Therefore, we looked into creating a comical song as contrast to the solemnity of Marjorie's death. We looked at the two songs, 'Everybody's Free to wear sunscreen' and 'Mack the Knife' from *Threepenny Opera*. Both songs further inspired our idea of having an omnipresent Narratorial voice. We improvised a chant as Narrators telling parts of Marjorie's story. Overall, we felt that what would produce the best comedy we should create a song for the *Body Snatchers* at Marjorie's coffin.

We felt that this scene became very didactic, which we felt excluded the audience. Therefore, we aimed to create a new scene which would develop an open discussion between the actors and audience. Brecht wanted to consistently expose his audience to social and political issues and highlight the reality of society. We wanted to replace this with research into social beliefs and scope at a variety of our audience's opinions on life and death. We created a lineup of eleven questions and conducted interviews with a range of people. We voice-recorded their answers and brought the recordings back



to rehearsal to discuss and highlight key comments of interest. This process inspired us greatly and we felt that it would be the best way of creating our desired political debate. We found that this would provoke Brecht's socialist, political dynamic of theatre, like a *Lehstrucke* play.

Development and Refinement of skills

Developing our Epic opening...

After feedback which commented on our opening lacking purpose, we spent lessons evaluating the message we wanted to portray. Knowing we wanted to explore both elderhood and youth we revisited our ideas on physical narration, working on a sequence displaying the body's transition from embryo to elder. Experimentation left us with a sequence from childhood to adulthood, where we mimicked baby crying noises before writhing into children playing clapping games, transforming into adults working and elders retiring. In the end, we had curated a scene which summarised the evolution of time and its fleeting nature, a stagnant statement we intended on presenting to our audience as early as possible.



As well, to build juxtaposition from the liveliness of our piece, we worked on an opening based on a funeral service. We were inspired by the set of a graveyard, experimenting with one narrator dressed as a skeleton, sweeping the dust/ashes off the stage as if creating a clean slate of thought. We incorporated a coffin and fashioned funeral programmes, adopting the funeral reality. Inspired by the *verfremdungseffekt*, we worked on making our service increasingly shocking, using solemn faces and synchronised walking to build a low feeling of morbidity.

To further distance our audience, we proceeded with our bingo scene, deciding to change the style and dynamic this time. We used the 'Pearl and dean' theme tune, and characterised ourselves as two bingo ladies beside host, 'The Bingo Man', developing our *gestus* to create archetypal characters. We experimented with the song, singing it with over-exaggerative vocality and expression. As 'Bingo Lady' I adopted the mannerisms of a TV show assistant of the 40s, fluttering my eyelids and smiling audaciously. After workshopping this scene, thinking about *gestus* and *spas*, we created a comedic script which would blend into our next scene of movement. Our next scene being based upon simple storytelling would, therefore, contrast nicely, building upon this *verfremdungseffekt*.

Developing our modern story...



After setting out Sarah's story we worked on developing its climax. We liked our use of movement to set out the basis but felt it would be over sentimental and emotive to display her husband's death and so looked at different methods of narration to tell it realistically. We spent time developing didactic narration, creating a solemn narrator of death, who would be reused. Simultaneously, we developed dialectic conversational storytelling, feeling a hybrid would dictate the scene best.

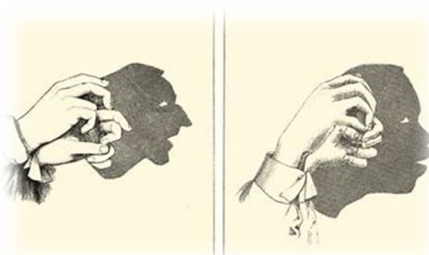
The focal part of Sarah's story is her husband's death, which we wanted to display with emotion and solemnity. We produced a split scene between the 'Narrator of death' and Sarah, experimenting with montage. We filtered the message of death being inevitable, simple and obvious. As the Narrator, I worked on

character neutrality and normality, aiming to act contrastingly to Sarah, to emphasise her emotion. I worked with Mark's death by framing his body, undulating my movement around him to highlight death's power; this being a key element of Brechtian narration. Adding to the non-naturalistic theme, I sculpted Mark into his position of death whilst narrated lines from Sarah's article, following the constant flow of social presence and unauthentic interaction with death. To bring emotionality, we drew inspiration from Mother Courage's silent scream, having Sarah dwell in her grief with vulgarity and vulnerability.

Historicization...

To build on the juxtaposition and humour we decided to historicise our scene about Marjorie McCall. We listened and researched sea shanty's, raps and folk, workshopping each. We felt that using rap would add farce, being a modern art form opposing the older era of our scene. We progressed our story onwards and got to the point at which Marjorie's grave is intruded upon by body snatchers. We experimented with the charisma and accents of the two body snatchers by workshopping cockney accents and breakdancing. We were inspired to create a 'Body Snatcher Rap', including balaclavas and extravagant makeup, influenced by our Kabuki theatre research. Incorporating historization of her story, created a juxtaposition of time eras, which proved to be really entertaining. Further development led to including Irish Jig music, where we curated an upbeat dance break to increase the dynamic of the scene and reflect Marjorie's character moreso. This idea added to our motif of light and darkness, where we generate a feeling of glee before concluding with sadness (Marjorie's death).

Bringing our Puppets to life...



After watching the 'Good Person of Setzuan' by National Theatre, we felt compelled to develop the puppetry in our piece; we wanted to further emphasise the varying voices in our piece and were inspired by the way Brecht mocked the Stanislavsky method with his singular wooden puppet. Thus, we mimicked the comedy proved, using three puppets singing in chorus. We experimented with more thematic juxtaposition of mature topics with children

and singing of a morbid topic. To present the differing opinions researched previously, we looked at replacing our skeleton puppets with shadow hand puppets. The visual element of this puppetry was effective and to conclude we developed the aural quality, creating entertaining accents which made our audiences laugh.

Comparing final performance with initial aims

At the beginning of our devising process, we set out to create a moral dilemma. We wanted to explore the reality of death, which we thought meant submerging our audience in grief and sorrow. By adopting Brecht, we aimed to cover social issues of the present and of the past, initially aiming to cover the darkest deaths and difficult emotions. We wanted to present this low through a slow pace, sad music and distance between the audience and each other. Due to death being a difficult topic we aimed to approach is sensitively and as cowards to reflect the usual response to death.

Becoming further equipped with Brecht inspired development. Through our own response to death being the way we initially aimed to present it, proved that we needed to deter from this and use our piece to help ourselves as well as our audience. Researching societal issues and current stories, inspired a passion for helping others and taking a didactic approach, teaching our audience how to cope with death, in contrast to our initial dialectic approach. Practicing Brecht's embedding of controversy opened up the juxtaposition of a positive outlook of death.

After workshoping spas and gestus we were inspired to pursue this optimistic perspective of dying, defying the common coping mechanism humans practice today. We started aiming to create a comedic outlook of death, thinking it would be memorable, an important aspect of a didactic lesson, as well as coming with comicalities. We aimed for an upbeat pace and dynamic, creating an energetic flow. Using an episodic approach helped with this, as we aimed to create multiple changing personas through characters, to keep our audience on edge and constantly thinking.

Ideas for Final Performance

For our final performance we wanted to use our connection as a group and with the audience to create cliffhangers, urging the audience to listen. Helping them feel both vulnerable in grief and happy in acceptance. We felt we executed this well; with our focus on pace and meditated dynamics we created certain pauses, creating this suspension. Moments where we state questions or controversial ideas relied on timing and silence, which we found built tension and provided time for questioning. We held onto these pauses together, developing the environment and establishing our story's reality for us and our audience with impact.

Having lots of props meant that transitioning was a main focus. We wanted to act through all prop/costume changes, assuring activity was pursued throughout, leaving the audience engaged and not stuck watching awkward set rearrangements. After the final performance, the audience commented on our committed saves when props occasionally moved from desired position. We managed to bring our manoeuvres together well, able to work as a team and use this to create a flow of story throughout, keeping the audience engaged, as intended. However, felt that next time, affirming these transitions would have glued the piece better and developed the pace further.

Additionally, we felt that next time we would pursue the theme of Assisted Suicide, instead of creating a metaphor about shadowing the theme just as a society does. We would attack the issue through thorough research and with respect, looking into Sarah's husband's story further. With the plethora of dark topics, already tackled, we didn't feel it was necessary, however, when scoping society truthfully and fearlessly, we needed to make it happen.

[Word Count = 2,920 (Excluding quotations, titles and Bibliography)]

Rehearsal shots



Bibliography

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Good Person of Setzuan by Bertolt Brecht

I spent years studying death, but it didn't prepare me for grief by Sarah Tarlow

It's gone on too long. Push me over the edge by Diana Rigg

Leisure by William Henry Davies

Lovesong by Frantic Assembly

Macbeth by the RSC

Mack the Knife by Kurt Viel

Melting Watches by Salvador Ali

Metamorphosis by Frantic Assembly

No Exit and Three Other plays by Jean Paul Sartre

Stacey Dooley: Inside the Undertakers

Tell Me the Truth About Life by Cerys Mathews

The Just Price of Flowers by Bertolt Brecht

The Tempest by William Shakespeare

Threepenny Opera by Bertolt Brecht