

## **ACTING in DIFFERENT GENRE**

In directing and in teaching it is essential to define the genre of the play being worked upon. This then opens up approaches to the style of presentation, to characterisations and for exercises to use with actors, providing a way in to developing specific skills that may be needed to work on a script.

In Greek and Elizabethan theatre the genre was clearly defined. Nowadays it can sometimes be difficult to analyse a specific genre. Many new plays are a mixture of styles or genres.

These notes are by no means definitive. They are intended as a quick reference and a springboard to further exploration or study.

They have been developed over many years from a range of sources, most recently from input at a Speech NZ examiners' seminar.

Shakespeare, as a genre, is not included in the text as many books are readily available.

See bibliography at the end.

### **COMEDY:**

A general term for most plays which are not tragedies.

Comedy addresses the intellect, tragedy the emotions.

Comedy concerns the social group, tragedy the fate of the individual.

A pleasant or humorous play, usually with a happy ending, not necessarily intended to produce laughter.

Characters engage attention rather than concern.

eg *Middle Aged Spread*, Roger Hall

## ***ACTING IN COMEDY:***

### ***PACE:***

*“In comedy, the issue is velocity. Characters must be driven to speak before they can think, never quite having time to engage with their reasoning facilities.” John Perry, ‘Encyclopedia of Acting’.*

So physical activity must change quickly, and often abruptly, the movement being driven by inner compulsion.

A good sense of timing; coming in on cue; use of pause for effect.

### ***ACTION:***

It is not just when we do it: Its WHAT we do WHEN.

Clarity of action – physical action must be precise and clear.

Look for opposites – discover what is different. Unexpected use of opposites, not telegraphing of them, is the lifeblood of comedy

### ***VOICE:***

Crisp consonants for added verve, making the language as physical as possible.

Performance and vocal energy need to be high.

### ***STATUS:***

Characters should be highly aware of their status – or lack of it. They frequently play status games.

Comedy is about the desire to win. Unimportant things may have life and death significance.

Be highly specific about what you are competing for.

### ***CHARACTERISATION:***

Look for foibles or idiosyncrasies, or discover what it is that drives the character: it may be that these could be exaggerated – the degree of exaggeration will depend on the demands of the particular play.

### ***BLACK COMEDY:***

Comedy with tragic elements often outrageously biting and ironic translating horror into humour with witty dialogue.

Black comedy challenges the audience, causing laughter through its irreverent treatment of subjects generally considered serious and important. e.g. death.

Black comedy seems to arise from exaggeration, from caricature and repetition, which gives an edge of insanity to the proceedings.

Elements of the bizarre and grotesque are often present and Absurdist theatre frequently contains elements of Black Comedy.

Each play is likely to present different acting challenges.

e.g. *Loot*, Joe Orton.

### ***ACTING IN BLACK COMEDY:***

Look for everything that applies in comedy (and farce) - and then more.

Precision and use of props needs sharp definition.

The wit and sharpness of rhythmic dialogue must be well pointed and paced throughout.

Voices must be flexible.

Facial expressions controlled.

Overall a sense of the normality of any bizarre events should prevail.

### ***FARCE:***

This is the type of comedy designed to provoke the audience to simple hearty laughter – belly laughs. There are usually highly exaggerated caricatured types of characters, in improbably ludicrous situations and free use is made of sexual buffoonery and physical horseplay.

In farce characters are subjected to various forms of indignity. The characters of farce often have a curious childish innocence, a lack of awareness of other people's concerns and a total obsession with their own. Farce depends on our awareness of problems of authority, sexuality and disorder, even whilst the play pretends to conjure them away.

Alfred Bermel, in his book *Farce* describes both Popular and Intellectual farce.

eg *Noises Off*, Michael Frayn, is popular farce: the basic assumption is the folly of mankind and its form is conventional and predictable. On the other hand, *Can't Pay? Won't Pay!* Dario Fo, is an intellectual farce: the basic assumption is the cruelty of life and its form is subversive and experimental.

### ***ACTING IN FARCE:***

Look for everything that applies in comedy and then add those degrees of exaggeration to suit the demands of the particular play.

Develop strong contrasting characters.

Develop and play to the hilt the obsessions and needs of each character.

Develop strong physical movement – such as slapstick.

Develop well timed comic routines.

Look for and develop extremes of status. The higher the status, the more there is to lose and therefore the drive to maintain status is even stronger.

Entrances and exits frequently need to be honed with split second timing – especially when it involves opening and closing doors.

Actors need to be fit as the energy cannot fall for a moment.

### **COMEDY OF MANNERS:**

A form of comedy which is primarily concerned with forms of behaviour and speech typifying the society of the day. Popular in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and focussed on the fripperies and superficiality of the Upper Classes.

This type of comedy satirises the foibles of individuals, their manners and their society. The plot is often farcical, the action fast paced and the style of dialogue witty.  
e.g. Restoration comedy and the plays of Oscar Wilde

### ***ACTING IN COMEDY OF MANNERS:***

Develop a clear understanding of the 'style' of the period.

Everyday behaviour was more formal, polite and conventional than our current societal manner.

Individual actions were governed by a rigid, inflexible social standard and an exaggerated sense of social decorum.

The use of the fan, bows, curtsies and manners of the time should be studied.

Costumes and the effect they had on posture and stance should be studied.

Movement may be choreographic, rather than internally motivated.

Asides need to be well pointed with precise movement and pauses.

*This is a society where speaking, witty repartee, wordplay and competing one-on-one through linguistic skills are the rules of the game.*

*In this world – speak up and never be silent – if you are silent you are shunned.*

*Voice in the front of the mouth for clear efficient direction of sound.                      Patsy Rodenberg.*

### **TRAGEDY:**

A play in which the protagonist suffers disaster after a serious and significant struggle, but faces his downfall in such a way as to attain heroic status.

The analysis of tragedy involves discussion of fundamental concepts such as fate, chance, causality and free will.

e.g. *View from the Bridge*, Arthur Miller.

### ***ACTING IN TRAGEDY:***

Develop skills of verse speaking for traditional tragedy – explore the images, metaphors, vocal sound, stresses or repetitions.

Understand the inner actions (thoughts) of the character.

Develop clear objectives that will drive your character.

Understand where these objectives shift.

Dig deep (when necessary) into the darker recesses of the mind to find the motivations.

Nothing is trivial – find the passions, griefs that will move the heart of the audience.

Typically characters wrestle with themselves – take care not to sentimentalise or indulge in the emotions or wash speeches with one emotion, as this will tip it towards melodrama or soap opera.

Develop total credibility of the characters within their world.

Explore the difference between shouting and intensity at strong moments. Shouting makes a noise, intensity makes a point.

## **MELODRAMA:**

A style of play that is usually romantic and sensational in plot and incident, containing violent appeals to the emotions. They often contain exaggerated conflicts between good and evil, wicked villains, guilty secrets.

Music is often used to highlight the dramatic moments.

e.g. Sweeney Todd the Barber, Brian J. Burton

## ***ACTING IN MELODRAMA:***

Play the extremes of the stock characters – the villainous landlord, the virtuous maiden.

Explore use of ‘dramatic’ gestures and movements – such as hand to heart or forehead.

Play the emotion of the moment to the hilt.

Ensure everyone works in the same ‘style’.

## **ABSURDIST THEATRE:**

Theatre of the Absurd deals with humanity’s purposelessness in an existence out of harmony with its surroundings, which produces a state of metaphysical anguish. There is an awareness of a lack of purpose in all we do, typified by Sisyphus for ever rolling a stone up a hill, never to reach the top.

*‘Irrational, illogical plays that often feature extreme exaggerations, surrealism and symbolism to make a point about our chaotic world or the meaninglessness of life.’*

*(Styles of Acting, Novak.)*

e.g. *The Birthday Party*, Harold Pinter. *The Bald Prima Donna*, Ionesco

## ***ACTING IN ABSURDIST THEATRE:***

Play with enjoyment of the absurdities, play them fully – to the characters they are normal.

Look for and explore areas that may develop from other ‘styles’ eg comedy, black comedy, farce, clown, dance, stylised movements or maybe drama.

Fully explore differences between ‘pauses’ and ‘silences’ that may be written into the script. (Pinter)

Explore the depth of feeling behind the often deceptively simple dialogue.

Be flexible both vocally and physically.

Remember the avowed aim of the dramatists is to bring theatricality to the theatre. In this enchanted place of the stage anything can happen – reality can flow into dreams and back to reality – the unexpected, the grotesque, the illogical may occur.

Study the script to determine the author’s theme and viewpoint. Decide whether the purpose is to get laughs, arouse horror, show despair, appear grotesque, or whatever it may be. Examine any stage directions in detail.

## **EPIC THEATRE:**

A style of drama that is consciously didactic. The audience is challenged to ‘ponder and learn’. Dealing with human problems, the ordinary is often exposed as extraordinary. Actors are alienated, heightening individuality. This genre seeks to eliminate emotion, participation and identification making the audience think and reflect instead of feel.

Politically motivated and questions the social conditions of the time. Seeks to educate the audience and inspire them to action.

*A series of incidents simply, clearly presented without restrictions of conventional construction.*

*Analytical view.*

*(Styles of*

*Acting, Novak).*

e.g. *The Good Person of Szechwan*, Bertolt Brecht.

## ***ACTING IN EPIC THEATRE:***

Brecht wanted the actor to observe the character; be surprised at what the character does; demonstrate the character’s actions, but not identify with the role.

He thought the actor should stand between the audience and the part.

*Brecht listed rules for his actors. Among others, he believed an actor should:*

- *Perform with awareness of being watched*
- *Make personal movements on stage when it suits*
- *Focus performance on the audience, deliberately acting at specific groups*
- *Speak the lines as if they were a quotation*
- *Speak directly to the audience*
- *Occasionally speak stage directions out loud*
- *Use robot-like mechanical, dream-like and other non-realistic movements and voice*
- *Use opposite styles of acting, such as acting a serious death scene in an outrageous comedy style.*

It is the director of a piece who decides whether actors should empathize with or remain detached from their characters, but it is important that actors understand Brecht's alienation or detachment concept whether or not they are actually called upon to use it.

Acting should be confident and comfortable.

Voice needs to be flexible to cover song, chant strange, disconnected and non-human sounds and speak in a range of dialects and class accents.

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