



ARTiculate Talk Series

Drama: Moving your monologue from page to stage

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*Discipline of Theatre and Performance Studies
School of Art, Communication and English*

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LEARNING RESOURCES

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What this session is about: Performing (and self-directing) for your HSC Drama IP

Not everyone is going to choose the Performance option for their Individual Project in the HSC Drama course but it is certainly one of the most popular options and now is the time to get started on selecting a script (or editing/writing material for a script), reading and analysing it, trying it out on the floor of a rehearsal room, and developing an overarching sense of the purpose and style of your performance.

In this session, we want to bring you (virtually) into the Rex Cramphorn Studio, home of the Discipline of Theatre and Performance Studies (TaPS) at the University of Sydney, to see how careful and painstaking, but also how wonderfully illuminating and fun, the work of rehearsing a script can be. You'll see one of our TaPS undergraduate students, Apsara Lindeman, working with a NIDA-trained director, and current postgraduate student, Jimmy Dalton, on a scene from John Logan's play, *Red*.

To be honest, we are breaking some rules here: one of the most challenging aspects of the Performance IP option is that *you will have to direct yourself*. Your teacher can be "a supervisor and facilitator", as NESAs puts it, and this can include "advice, assistance and negotiation" (which does sound super helpful!) but they can't direct you, they can't make the key artistic decisions for you.

The reason we wanted to let you see how a professional director works with an actor is simple. To do a good job of the Performance IP, you need to approach your chosen script with the same kind of rigorous questioning of the text that you will see Jimmy modelling with Apsara. The same goes for anyone who is looking at this ARTiculate session for tips about the Directing, Design, Scriptwriting or Video HSC Drama IP Options. To come up with a design concept for sets, lighting, costumes, or promotional material, to improve your dramaturgical skills as a scriptwriter or video artist, to develop a director's folio, you need to do a lot of the same preparation that a professional director would bring to the first rehearsal of a play.

There are many excellent books on directing that can help you here, but one particularly clear and useful guide is *The Director's Craft* by the brilliant UK director, Katie Mitchell. We've included some excerpts from her book at the end of this Learning Resources kit and encourage you to look at it in more depth in your own time. She suggests some really practical ways of "mining" the script for information and will get you producing long lists of all the "given circumstances" (put these in your IP logbook!), isolating key ideas that you think the play can express, finding the major "event" in a scene and how it shifts the "intention" of the character, et cetera.

We hope you enjoy the session and look forward to dealing with as many of your questions as we can. With your teacher's help, we know that you can all grab the opportunity of your Drama IP to make something beautiful, challenging, fun, and wondrous for your audience.

Dr Paul Dwyer (Chair of Theatre and Performance Studies, University of Sydney)

Some options for finding plays and monologues

We won't lie: it's not easy to find (or edit or create) the perfect script for a Performance IP. Your teacher can offer some suggestions, but you need to explore these and other possibilities as actively as you can. Try to have some search criteria in mind: What kind of characters have you enjoyed most in your high school Drama classes to date? What styles and conventions of theatre excite you?

There are lots of collections of monologues that you can find in books or online. For instance, Methuen Drama publishes a whole series of these: *Monologues for Young Actors*, *Contemporary Monologues for Women*, *Queer Monologues*, *Modern Monologues for Men*, and so on. It might help to firm up your selection criteria if you skim through some of these.

But we also want to recommend some options closer to home:

Currency Press (<https://www.currency.com.au/>) is the leading publisher of playscripts in Australia and you will find on their website all the modern classics as well as some of the most recently staged new Australian work. Their catalogue includes an option to search for monologues, from both Australian and international works. In many cases, you can get a free preview of the start of a script to help you decide if it's worth exploring further.

Australian Plays Transform (<https://apt.org.au/>) is an organisation that supports the development of new Australian plays as well as publishing plays online and selling plays for other publishers. Like Currency, they have an easy-to-use catalogue and you can usually read short excerpts of the plays online for free to get an idea of what they're like stylistically. During the period of Covid lockdowns, they asked a number of leading Australian theatre professionals to name their top 3 favourite Australian plays. You might find exactly what you're looking for in this collection: <https://apt.org.au/australianplayaday/>

Griffin Theatre (<https://griffintheatre.com.au/>) is dedicated to the production of new Australian plays and has staged some really exciting work recently, showcasing a wide and diverse range of writers, pushing into all kinds of new forms. It's easy to see the details of their 2023 and newly launched 2024 seasons, plus the archive of past shows. You'll find a brief blurb, telling you what each play is about and often there'll be links to reviews. Again, this will help you to decide if you want to chase up a Griffin script (Currency and APT publish and or sell most of these).

Belvoir St Theatre (<https://belvoir.com.au/>) also has a great track record of bringing new Australian work to the stage, along with some of the best contemporary playwriting from overseas and some excellent "re-imaginings" of classic plays. Their website has an excellent link to a whole host of Education Resources (<https://belvoir.com.au/education/resources/>), including their archive of past shows and workshops/learning materials specifically related to the different HSC Drama IP options. (Check out their series of short videos on performing a monologue: <https://belvoir.com.au/education/resources/performing/>).

Introducing John Logan's play, *Red*, our case study — and a content warning



Red is a contemporary play by the American writer, John Logan, which has enjoyed very successful seasons in London, New York, and Adelaide. It features two characters who are onstage together for most of the play: the artist, Mark Rothko (a real person, one of the giants of the Abstract Expressionist movement) and his studio assistant, Ken.

The inciting incident for the play is a real event: in 1958, Rothko accepted a very well-paid commission to paint a mural for an up-market restaurant, The Four Seasons, located in the iconic Seagram Building in New York. The paintings he started producing for this commission are now among his most famous works: large canvases with deep, multiple layers of different shades of brown, red, and black, an intense absorption with the possibilities of colour and texture that seems to produce an almost meditative quality in the viewer (not so easy to represent in a photograph, but hopefully the image above gives you some idea!).

The action of the play unfolds over the course of two years as Ken assists the unpredictable, often irascible, Rothko in his studio by helping prepare the undercoating of canvases, cleaning all the painting materials, shopping for take-away food and cigarettes. Ken is a young artist himself but Rothko resists becoming a mentor for him. Gradually, however, they come to admire certain qualities in each other. Ken is ultimately responsible for provoking Rothko into cancelling the Seagram Building commission and handing back the money: both characters recognise that these paintings deserve a better fate than to be the backdrop to a swank restaurant meal. (You can see them today, beautifully displayed in a dedicated room of the Tate Gallery in London to whom Rothko donated the paintings.)

Content Warning

Throughout the play, Rothko often asks Ken what he sees in the paintings. A particular shade of red, in the scene that follows, prompts Ken to describe a memory from his childhood, the scene of his parents' murder.

Then he steps back and back, studies the canvas from across the studio.

ROTHKO: (*Musing.*) So...so...so...it'll do... Maybe it'll do... Possibly adequate... What do you think?

KEN: You mean me? You want me to answer?

ROTHKO: Who else?

KEN: It's a...a good ground, a good base layer. Nice and even.

ROTHKO: We'll see when it dries. Then I can start to paint.

KEN: You really care what I think?

ROTHKO: Not at all.

KEN smiles, continues to clean up.

Then he stops abruptly.

Something about the freshly-primed canvas strikes him.

He stares at it.

Surprisingly, tears come to his eyes. The emotion is unexpected.

ROTHKO: What?

KEN: Nothing...

ROTHKO: What is it?

KEN: It's strange... I'm remembering something... The, um, color...is...

ROTHKO: What?

KEN: Doesn't matter.

ROTHKO: What?

KEN: Dried blood... When the blood dried it got *darker*. On the carpet.

ROTHKO: Which carpet?

KEN: Where my parents died.

KEN tries to shake off the thought. He moves away.

But then he stops again. He can't shake the emotion.

The canvas draws him back.

KEN: It's exactly the color. When the blood dried it got *darker*, that surprised me. I remember being surprised by that...

ROTHKO is intrigued.

ROTHKO: What happened to your parents?

KEN: I don't want to talk about it.

ROTHKO: Yes you do.

KEN: They were murdered.

ROTHKO: Did you say murdered?

KEN: Mm.

ROTHKO: How old were you?

KEN: Seven. This was back in Iowa.

ROTHKO: What happened?

KEN: I honestly don't remember it too well.

ROTHKO: Sure you do.

KEN stares forward, lost in thought.

Beat.

ROTHKO: What do you see?

KEN shakes his head.

ROTHKO: What do you see?

Beat.

KEN: (*Reliving it.*) I woke up...and the first thing I saw was the snow outside my window. I was glad it snowed because it was Saturday and I could go sledding. My Dad would take me sledding, me and my sister. But...but...I didn't smell anything. That was weird. Normally my Mom would be up making breakfast. It was really quiet. I put on my slippers – they were those Neolite ones that look like moccasins. Go into the hall... Now it's really quiet... And it's *cold*. There's a window open somewhere... Then I see my sister, she's just standing in the hallway, staring into my parent's room. The door's open. My sister...she's standing in a puddle of pee. Just staring. Her eyes... I go to the door and look in and see the snow first. Outside the window, so much snow, maybe I'll still go

sledding. And then the blood. The bed's stained with it. And the wall. They're on the bed... It was a knife... Apparently it was a knife, I found out later.

Beat.

KEN: Burglars, I found out. At least two of them... But right now I don't know what to do. I just *see*... I... Don't want my sister to see any more. My little sister... I turn around and push her out and shut the door. The door handle... With blood... Is red.

Beat.

KEN: That's all.

ROTHKO: What happened then?

KEN: You mean after that? Um... Nothing really. We went to the neighbours. They called the police.

ROTHKO: What happened to you two?

KEN: State took us. Foster homes. People were nice, actually. They kept us together. But they shuffled us around a lot. We were *rootless*... She's married to a CPA now.

ROTHKO: Rootless?

KEN: Never belonged... Never had a *place*.

ROTHKO: Did they find the guys who did it?

KEN: No. I paint pictures of them sometimes.

Beat.

ROTHKO: You paint pictures of the men who killed your parents?

KEN: Mm. What I imagine them to look like.

ROTHKO: Which is what?

Beat.

KEN: Normal.

Beat.

ROTHKO considers comforting KEN in some way, but doesn't.

He moves away, lights a cigarette.

ROTHKO: When I was a kid in Russia, I saw the Cossacks cutting people up and

PRE-REHEARSAL NOTES ON LOGAN'S PLAYSRIPT

PREPARED BY DIRECTOR, JIMMY DALTON

(based, broadly, on suggestions in Katie Mitchell's book, *The Director's Craft* — see below)

***Red* by Joe Logan**

<i>Facts</i>	<i>Questions</i>
<p>The year is circa 1958 – 1959</p> <p>The place is Rothko's studio, 222 Bowery, New York City</p> <p>The studio is an old YMCA gymnasium</p> <p>There is a vestibule where Ken and Rothko change into work clothes, and enter/exit the studio</p> <p>It has hardwood flooring splattered with hues of dark red paint.</p> <p>Rothko's Seagram Mural paintings are stacked and displayed around the space.</p> <p>There is a pulley system for raising, lowering and displaying several paintings simultaneously.</p> <p>There are cluttered counters or tables with buckets of paint, tins of turpentine, tubes of glue, crates of eggs, bottles of Scotch, packets of pigment, coffee cans filled with brushes, a portable burner/stovetop and a phone.</p> <p>There is a phonograph with a messy stack of records.</p> <p>Rothko has received a commission to provide paintings for a small room in the restaurant of the Seagram Building.</p> <p>Rothko has received \$39,000 for the commission (around USD2mil)</p> <p>Rothko's preference is for classical music.</p> <p>Rothko is an Abstract Expressionist.</p> <p>Rothko is in his 50s or older.</p> <p>Ken is a visual artist, a painter.</p> <p>Ken is in his 20s.</p> <p>Ken is hired to work as Rothko's assistant.</p> <p>Ken grew up in Iowa.</p> <p>Ken has a sister, younger than him.</p> <p>Ken's parents were murdered in winter when he was seven years old.</p> <p>Ken was seven between 1936-1945.</p> <p>Ken and his sister grew up in state care.</p> <p>Ken's sister is married to a CPA.</p>	<p>Why is Rothko's age unknown, if he is a real person and the year is roughly known?</p> <p>In what year did Rothko mask his Jewish identity?</p> <p>What was happening in the US when Rothko emigrated there?</p> <p>Where did Ken study?</p> <p>Where does Ken paint?</p> <p>When does Ken paint?</p> <p>What kind of paintings does Ken do?</p> <p>Has Ken exhibited any of his paintings?</p> <p>What is the painting Ken has brought in to show Rothko?</p> <p>What prompted Ken to choose to bring his painting to Rothko on that day?</p> <p>Where does Ken live?</p> <p>What does Ken do before and after work?</p> <p>What is Ken's religion or spiritual belief?</p> <p>Where is Ken's sister now?</p> <p>When was the last time they were together?</p> <p>Who does Ken speak with on the telephone?</p> <p>Who is Sidney?</p> <p>How much of his parents' murder does Ken remember before he sees the hue of darker red?</p> <p>What brand of Scotch does Rothko drink?</p> <p>What brand of cigarettes does Rothko smoke?</p> <p>What brand of coffee does Rothko drink?</p> <p>Does Ken smoke?</p> <p>Where does Ken buy Scotch, cigarettes, coffee, pigments and other supplies?</p> <p>How long does it take to prepare one canvas?</p> <p>How much paint is required for a single canvas?</p> <p>How long does it take Rothko to paint one of his Murals?</p>

<p>Rothko is Jewish and was born in Russia. Rothko has a memory told to him that he saw Cossacks kill people in Russia. Rothko moved to Portland when he was ten. Rothko's first agent had him change his name so no one would know he was Jewish. Rothko and Ken work nine to five, five days a week. Ken arrives at the studio before Rothko most mornings. Ken prepares the canvases and helps Rothko apply a base coat. Ken makes jokes. Rothko instructs Ken to 'be exact' and 'be serious'. Rothko plays music when he is working. Rothko drinks Scotch regardless of time of day. Rothko hates the 'thing' black.</p>	<p>Why does Rothko not like jazz? Why does Ken play jazz instead of classical? When did Rothko go on holiday to Italy? Where has Ken travelled to? When did Ken come to New York? Why is Ken working for Rothko? Why won't Rothko be Ken's mentor? How much of <i>The Birth of Tragedy</i> did Ken read? What is happening in New York at this time? What is happening in the US at this time? What is happening in the world at this time? What were the public and critical responses to Rothko's work at this time? What were the public and critical responses to the Pop and later Abstract Expressionist artists at this time?</p>
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Ideas of the play

Tragedy

Movement

Truth and Hypocrisy

The black swallows the red

To be weighed and found wanting

Commodification and Vulnerability

Seriousness

A life is irreducible to a single idea

We need to be together

We need to know what we are a part of

Immediate Circumstances

Place

— Rothko's studio, New York City 1958-1959 (what season?)

— No natural light

— Smells of paint, turpentine, wood, cigarette smoke, coffee

— Classical music plays, but do they hear the sounds of the city in 'silence'?

— It is mid-morning

— Ken's childhood home, Iowa late 30s/early 40s (winter)

— Cold

— Early morning

- Too quiet
- No strong smells
- Ken’s bedroom, sister’s bedroom, a hallway, a kitchen, outside, parent’s bedroom
- Rural

Trigger event/circumstances

- Ken has brought his painting to show Rothko for the first time, *if Rothko is in a good mood*.
- Ken has just ended a phone call with someone who tells him what to do, just like Rothko.
- Ken has built and prepared a canvas, which Rothko inspected and did not find any flaws in besides from some fluff.
- Rothko mixed a new hue of maroon for the undercoat.
- Ken and Rothko have just finished applying the undercoat.
- Both are exhausted.
- Rothko had just seen the Seagram restaurant under construction and said there was too much natural light.
- Ken asked Rothko if he thinks it is the right place for his paintings.
- Ken has just read *The Birth of Tragedy* on Rothko’s recommendation.
- Ken and Rothko have discussed *The Birth of Tragedy* and how it relates to Rothko and Pollock’s works.
- They have discussed whether Pollock killed himself or died by accident.
- Rothko has said “when I commit suicide” and then pretended he didn’t say this.
- Rothko has spoken about the danger of capitalism and one’s art becoming a commodity—an overmantle.
- Rothko asked Ken “what do you see” about the new undercoat. Ken gave matter-of-fact responses.
- While cleaning, something in the painting catches Ken’s eye and he is surprised by a memory. He sheds a tear.
- Rothko asks Ken to explain what is wrong, and Ken tells him he is remembering something about his parents.
- The trigger for Ken is he has seen the exact colour of red that is blood getting darker as it dried in the carpet of his parent’s bedroom, and remembers being surprised by that.
- Ken tells Rothko his parents were murdered when he was seven.
- Rothko prompts Ken to remember and asks him “what do you see?” twice, in the same way he has asked Ken to give details about paintings.

Events

- 1) Ken wakes up.
- 2) Ken doesn’t smell breakfast cooking.
- 3) Ken puts on his slippers and leaves his room (shift to present tense).
- 4) Ken sees his sister standing in the hallway, staring into their parents’ room.
- 5) Ken sees the blood.
- 6) Ken sees the doorhandle stained with blood is red.

Intentions

Ken is sharing with Rothko this memory to be exact about the colour red he saw in his childhood. He is demonstrating his skill in being exact and serious.

Ken wants Rothko to be satisfied by his discovery of this specific red and stop asking him to live in this memory.

Ken wants Rothko to let go of his 'fear of black' because it is based on a sentimental stereotype.

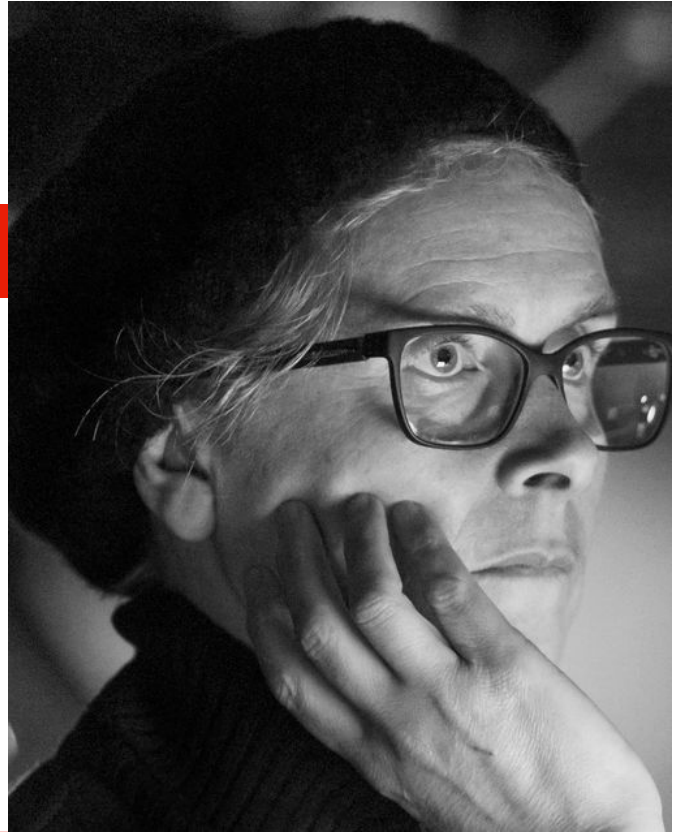
Ken wants Rothko to acknowledge that red can also mean death. That the meaning is arbitrary and paint is paint. Ken wants to show Rothko he is not afraid of a colour.

Ken wants Rothko to accept that he is also an artist, even if he has different ideas and experiences of art.

KATIE MITCHELL

Job title

Visiting Artist



COURSES

Directing with Katie Mitchell

PROFILE

Katie Mitchell has directed over 100 productions in a career spanning 30 years. She directs mainstream text-based theatre, opera and live cinema productions (a unique combination of video and theatre techniques). In the UK she has directed 9 productions for the Royal Shakespeare Company, 19 for the National Theatre and 12 for The Royal Court - and she has been an Associate Director at all three organisations. Her opera work includes productions for English National Opera, the Royal Opera House, The Staatsoper (Berlin) and Opera Comique (Paris).

Since 2008 she has split her time between working in the UK and on mainland Europe in countries including Germany, France, Holland and Scandinavia. She is currently a resident director at the Schaubühne (Berlin), the Deutsches Schauspielhaus (Hamburg) and she has just finished a seven-year residency at the Aix-en-Provence Festival (France). In 2015 the Stadsschouwburg Theatre in Amsterdam hosted a retrospective of her work, presenting 8 productions from across Europe.

Her many awards in the UK include 2 Time Out Awards (1990 & 1991), The Evening Standard Best Director Award (1996) and a Tonic Award for her representations of woman and nurture of female talent (2018). Her awards in Europe and beyond include 3 Theatertreffen prizes (Germany) in 2008 & 2009, an Obie Award (US) in 2009, 2 Golden Mask Awards (Russia) in 2011 & 2019, the Stanislavsky International Prize (Russia) in 2014, The New Theatrical Realities, Europe Prize in 2014 and Best Director for 2019 at the International Opera Awards.

She was presented with the Order of the British Empire (OBE) 2009 and the British Academy's President's Medal in 2017 for her services to theatre.

She is currently a Professor in Theatre Directing at Royal Holloway University where teaches on an MA directing course and she is also a Visiting Professor at Columbia University.

Excerpts from Katie Mitchell, *The Director's Craft: A Handbook for The Theatre*. London: Routledge, 2009.

Preparing for rehearsals

This section of the book describes everything you need to do to prepare for rehearsals. The goal of your preparation should be extracting information from the text that will help the actors to perform the characters and situations in the play.

When you look at a situation in life, you will notice that the behaviour of the individuals involved is determined by a complex set of factors. Think back to the last time you observed a couple in a room having an argument. Did you notice whether the room they were standing in was hot or cold, airy or stuffy? Did you notice whether it was a room in a house or a flat? Did you notice whether there were people near who could overhear or not? Did you notice the time of day? Did you have any future pictures about what the people were going to do next? Did you have any past pictures of events in the relationship that were determining the present action? Were you able to notice any of these things, even if the words the two people were saying to each other did not touch on any of these subjects directly? Did you notice what each of them wanted from the other person? Did they want to be forgiven or to be understood?

A lot of this information will be legible in what the couple do physically – you will be able to read information by how they sit, how they move, how they spread the butter on their toast or put their coat on as they are leaving. For example, if it is cold the two people will make involuntary and voluntary gestures to keep warm. If one person is late, their actions will be faster than those of the other person. Other information will emerge from how they talk to each other, whether quickly or slowly, quietly or loudly. The information this couple communicate about themselves and their relationship is therefore both verbal and physical. And if it is verbal, the tone of how they speak is as significant as the content of what they are saying.

When you read a play, it is a good idea to search for information about all the factors that create or affect the behaviour of the characters in the action of the play (or the factors that determine the changes in their behaviour). If these factors are not explicitly stated, you might need to read the scenes carefully to infer the precise

circumstances in which the characters find themselves. The factors you need to search for come under the following headings:

Place: The environment the characters are in.

Character biographies: The events in the past that shape the characters.

Immediate circumstances: The 24 hours preceding the action of each scene or act.

Time: The year, or season, or hour the action takes place in, or the effect of the passage of time between acts or scenes.

Events: The changes that affect the behaviour of the characters.

Intentions: The pictures of the future that drive the present action of the characters.

Relationships: The thoughts about others that calibrate the behaviour of the characters.

There are, of course, other preparations that you need to make before directing the play and these preparations will be investigated in the chapters that follow. But identifying the factors that determine the behaviour and the actions of the characters should lie at the heart of your preparatory work.



The Maids by Jean Genet

CHAPTER 1

Organising your early responses to the text

This chapter is about organising your early responses to the text and building the world that exists before the action of the play begins. It has six steps:

Using lists of facts and questions

Organising information about what exists before the action of the play begins

Research

Answering difficult questions about the text

Place

Character biographies

Undertaking these steps will ensure that you have an objective relationship to the play. Your objectivity will help you to build a world that is specific and, later on, it will help you talk about the play in a way that actors will find useful.

Using lists of facts and questions

When you first start working on a play, you need a simple way of organising your discoveries and responses. Listing information in the form of facts and questions will help you to do this. Facts are the non-negotiable elements of the text. They are the main clues that the writer gives you about the play. In *The Seagull* they include things like 'Arkadina has a son called Konstantin' or 'Medvedenko is a school teacher' or 'It is Russia'. Questions are a way of notating the areas of the text that are less clear or that you are simply not sure of. Ask a question about anything that is not simple or clear. Questions might include things such as 'What happened to Konstantin's father?', or 'What season is it?', or 'Where is Sorin's estate in Russia?' Always write facts and questions down in simple and objective sentences. As a rule of thumb, if you are not immediately sure that what you have identified is a fact, turn it into a question.

Organising information in this way encourages you to hold an objective relationship to the material and inhibits premature attempts to interpret the play. Lists

of facts and questions will be used in the exercises outlined in this chapter and in Chapter 2, when working on the action of the play.

Summary

Use lists of facts and questions to organise your responses to the text.

Organising information about what exists before the action of the play begins

Organising information from the text about what exists before the action of the play begins will help you to map the physical, geographical and temporal certainties of the play – and create a picture of each character’s past. No rehearsal process occurs without the actors asking questions about what has happened before the action of the play begins, and it is therefore enormously advantageous to have a firm grasp of this information. This will enable you to address simple questions about place like, ‘Where have I just come from?’, or more complex questions about past events in characters’ lives like, ‘When did I first meet Trigorin?’

Use the facts and questions format to collect information about everything that exists or has happened before the action of the play. Make two lists: one of facts and one of questions. I call these lists the ‘back history’ lists. Facts include things like ‘Arkadina married Gavril Treplev’ or ‘It is Russia’ or ‘Nina’s mother is dead’. Every fact must be written down – however tiny. It might just be a brief and apparently irrelevant event like Sorin’s description of how one of his deputy prosecutors told him his voice was disagreeable, or the fact that Trigorin’s writing is translated into other languages, but each one matters when it comes to building a past life for the character. Questions include things like ‘What happened to Konstantin’s father?’, or ‘Where is Sorin’s estate in Russia?’, or ‘When and where did Arkadina play *La Dame aux Camélias*?’

Remember, if you are uncertain about whether something is a fact or a question, put it down as a question. For example, you may want to put ‘Arkadina played Gertrude in *Hamlet*’ as a fact because she quotes from the Shakespeare play in Act One, but there is no direct evidence that she played Gertrude so it is best to write the question ‘Did Arkadina ever act Gertrude in *Hamlet*?’ Sometimes you will find that questions you ask at the beginning of the task are answered later on in the action. When this happens, cross out the question and add the answer to the list of facts. Remember, however, not to list any information about events in between scenes or anything that happens during the action of the play.

Here are the first few facts established by reading Act One of *The Seagull*.

It is Russia.
There is an estate, which belongs to Sorin.
There is a park.
There is a broad avenue of trees leading to the park.
There is a lake.
There is a platform, which blocks the view of the lake.
There is some shrubbery.
There are a few chairs and a garden table.
There is a curtain and it is lowered.
Masha has worn black for as long as Medvedenko has known her.
Medvedenko earns 23 roubles a month, less deductions for his pension.
Masha's father is an estate manager.
There are beggars.
Medvedenko has a sick mother, two sisters and a little brother. He supports his family financially.
Konstantin is in love with Nina.
Medvedenko lives three miles away from the estate.
Medvedenko has declared his love to Masha.
Medvedenko is a school teacher.
Snuff exists.
Masha has a snuff box containing snuff.
It is close.
It is evening.

Here are the first few questions established by reading from Act One.

What year is it?
Where is Sorin's estate in Russia? (Is it based on a real place that the writer knew?)
How large is the estate?
What was the normal size of an estate at the time in Russia?
What type of trees line the avenue?
What size is the lake?
What type of shrubbery is it?
Why does Masha wear black?
How much is 23 roubles worth in pounds today?
What was a teacher's pension at the time?
What would an estate manager earn at the time?
Does Masha have a job?
What is the illness that Medvedenko's mother has?

CHAPTER 2

Organising information about each scene

This chapter looks at how to organise information about each scene so that you have some simple starting points for rehearsals. The conclusions you make can be jotted down on A4 sheets of paper and slipped into your script before the relevant scene. It has three steps:

Immediate circumstances

What happens between scenes or acts

Time

Immediate circumstances

'Immediate circumstances' are the events that happen in the 24 hours or so leading up to the action of a scene. They might include what happened a couple of minutes before the scene begins or something that occurs on the previous evening. These events have a direct impact on the action of the scene and immediately give the actors something concrete to play.

When you write your initial back history list of facts and questions about *The Seagull*, you will notice there is a difference between the things that have been there for a long time, like a lake, and recent additions such as the hurriedly improvised stage. You will also notice the difference between events in the distant past that shaped the characters (like Arkadina's marriage to Gavril Treplev) and recent events that have just occurred to the characters (like the walk from which Masha and Medvedenko have just returned in Act One). Recent events or additions to the landscape, such as the improvised stage and the walk, constitute the immediate circumstances of the first act.

Because you have already answered the majority of questions on your initial back history list through careful research or by receiving simple impressions from the text, your list will now contain only the immediate circumstances for the first scene or act. Here is a list of the immediate circumstances for Act One of *The Seagull*.

*There is a stage that has been hurriedly run up.
There is a platform blocking the view of the lake.
There is a curtain and it is lowered.
Masha and Medvedenko have been for a walk.
It is close.
It is damp.
It is dusk.
Last night Sorin went to bed at 10pm and woke up this morning at 9am.
There has been dinner.
Sorin fell asleep at lunchtime.
The performance of the play starts at 8.30pm and will last no longer than half an hour.
There are wings at the side of the platform.
There is no scenery.
The dog was howling last night and the night before. Arkadina complained to Sorin about it.
Nina has to leave after half an hour, at 9pm.
Nina's father and stepmother have gone out.
The sky is red.
Last night Dorn sat on the veranda talking with Arkadina.
Eight people have been invited to watch the play.
There is a large stone on the platform.*

Here is a list of the questions related to these facts.

*When was the platform put up and by whom? Why was it hurriedly done?
Where are the workmen from and what do they normally do on the estate?
What is the curtain like and how does it operate?
What day of the week is it?
Why did Masha and Medvedenko go for a walk and how long have they been walking?
What time was dinner and who was eating it? What did they eat?
Who invited everyone to see the play and when were they invited? What did Konstantin say to Arkadina about the play?
When did Trigorin arrive at the estate?
How has Konstantin been attacking Arkadina since she arrived?
When did Arkadina tell Sorin about the dog howling?
What season is it?
Has the dog kept anyone else awake in the night?
Why was the dog howling?
Does Konstantin know that Nina has to leave by 9pm before she tells him?*

ographies of dead writers to be useful both in yielding information about the person who wrote the play and in helping actors to build their character biographies.

Summary

List the simplest facts about the writer's life.

Ask yourself how these facts shed light on the play.

Look for any details of the writer's life which talk more specifically to anything in the play.

Find out what was happening in the writer's life at the time the play was written.

Be prepared to receive no direct answers from a living writer about their personal life.

Read with caution any critical literature about the writer or the play.

The ideas that underpin the text

The ideas that underpin the text determine everything that is said and done during the action of the play, so you must have a firm grasp on them. There is, however, a difference between identifying these ideas and arriving at a concept of how you are going to interpret a play. A concept is something that the director imposes on a play. An idea is what the writer focused on whilst writing the play – either consciously or unconsciously. A word of warning though: do not mistake the search for the ideas that underpin the text as a licence to return to literary criticism or engage in discursive abstract debates. The process is simpler.

Most plays contain between three and four major ideas. Search for them by reading the play slowly and repeatedly asking yourself the question: 'What is the play about?' Answer the question with simple sentences such as: 'The play is about the passage of time' or 'The play is about death'. Avoid long-winded and complex answers. Write down all the answers on a piece of paper. By the end of the process you will have between five and ten possible answers. An idea must have a relationship with nearly every character in the play and large chunks of the action must be concerned with investigating this idea. Measure each of your possible ideas against the characters and the action.

When I first read *The Seagull* I was struck by how many characters were unhappy in love. I wanted to see if this was a possible idea and this is how I notated my investigation.

Arkadina: The fact that she and Gavril are no longer together could be a result of unhappiness in their relationship. In the action her love for Trigorin is unhappy because of his affair with Nina.

Konstantin: His love for Nina is unrequited.

Sorin: His love for Nina is unrequited.

Nina: Her love for Trigorin is unrequited after the initial affair has ended.

Shamrayev: Perhaps his love for Polina is in some way unhappy because of her love for Dorn and the possibility that Masha is not his child. However, there is no evidence in what he says or does to suggest that he thinks like this.

Polina: She is unhappy in her relationship with Dorn, whom she loves.

Masha: Her love for Konstantin is unrequited.

Trigorin: His love for Nina peters out in between Acts Three and Four and you have to ask whether he is happy in his relationship with Arkadina after that.

Dorn: There is a possibility that his love for Arkadina is unrequited. Also, at 50 he is still unmarried, which might suggest some unhappiness in that aspect of his life. His affairs which took place when he was in his 40s probably caused some unhappiness for others.

Medvedenko: His love for Masha is not met by an equivalent strength of feeling from her, even though she marries him. They are clearly an unhappy couple in Act Four.

Yakov: There is no evidence that he is unhappy in love.

Eight out of 11 characters are unhappy in love and two more (Dorn and Shamrayev) are possibly unhappy – although this is not stated explicitly in the text. In the action of the play we repeatedly see people in love, falling in love and being unhappy in love. Because it affects so many characters, and because it impacts on the action of the play, I decided that unhappiness in love was definitely an idea.

You might test-run the theme of death/illness because of your work on the writer's life.

Arkadina: She has possibly lost her husband, and her mother and father are dead (although some time ago).

Konstantin: He attempts suicide twice, the second time successfully.

Sorin: He is ill throughout the play and has had a heart attack by Act Four, suggesting that he is close to death.

Nina: Her mother died before the action began and her baby son dies during the action.

Shamrayev: He was a soldier and was therefore possibly involved in military action where he saw people die. The absence of a second child may hint at a fertility problem.

Polina: She has only one child, which would have been strange at the time. Perhaps she lost other children?

Masha: She dresses in black as if she were in mourning.

Trigorin: During the action of the play he loses his baby son.

Dorn: His work puts him in touch with death and illness.

Medvedenko: His father died before the action began.

Yakov: There is nothing to link him to the theme of death and illness.

Konstantin, Sorin, Nina, Trigorin, Dorn and Medvedenko have direct experience of death and illness. The other characters may have direct experiences of death and illness but this is not concrete evidence. Because the idea doesn't affect every character, you can choose to include it or not.

The four ideas I isolated for use in my own rehearsal room were: destroyed dreams, unhappiness in love, family and art. Notice how these descriptions reduce big ideas to simple and concrete phrases that the actors can easily grasp. However, do not think about this process as a reductive one that oversimplifies a more complex picture. Rather, see it as a way of efficiently mapping the intellectual structure behind the action. At the end of the process, ask yourself which of the ideas you have the greatest affinity with. Then for the rest of the process remember to work on all the ideas and not just that one.

Next, select the most important idea that you have identified. This will help you to understand what the play is about. Sometimes the key idea will stand out very clearly from the others. If it does not, return to the play and read it again with all the ideas in mind. Studying the action will normally guide you to the answer. For example, in *The Seagull*, I decided that the most important idea is destroyed dreams. If you have reread the play and are still struggling to select one idea, the title might help. Go through all the references to the title in the play and see whether they all point in the direction of one idea. For example, if you go through all the moments when the seagull is mentioned you will quickly discover that it is not only associated with Nina. It is also a symbol of dreams or ideals and, during the action, as it is shot and stuffed it grows into a symbol of dreams that are destroyed.

If you diagnose the ideas correctly, the process takes you deep inside the writer's head and it is crucial to honour these ideas – however else you may interpret the material. Chapter 10 will help you to use ideas in a practical and concrete way with the actors.

Summary

Jot down the ideas which underpin the text.

Check the accuracy of your choices by seeing that most of the characters have a relationship to these ideas and that large chunks of the action are concerned with exploring them.

Isolate the idea with which you have the greatest affinity.

Select the most important idea of the play in order to find out what it is about.

The genre or style of the play

Style and genre define the world that the audience see and the way in which the characters interact in that world. Working out the genre or style of a play you are about to direct will help you to communicate the material accurately. Each genre – from symbolism to satire, from black comedy to farce – has its own history and its own logic. For example, if the genre is realism (as in John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger*) the characters will obey the logic of real-life behaviour with the accuracy of a film documentary. If the genre is surrealism (such as August Strindberg’s *A Dream Play* or Pablo Picasso’s *Desire Caught by the Tail*), the characters will obey the logic of dreams, where the banal and the fantastical can co-exist in the same place unchallenged.

Realism and naturalism are the dominant genres in Western European theatre. These terms describe very different things in painting and literature, but in theatre, the words are interchangeable. Remember that actors from the West will automatically apply the rules of realism to a text, unless you guide them in a different direction. Know, however, that actors are more than capable of working with many genres – as long as you are clear about the rules of engagement from the outset.

A decision about genre should not remain as an intellectual cloud floating vaguely above the production or just hovering in your head; it must be translated into concrete action for the audience to watch. Start to think about how to do this. For example, I decided to direct *The Seagull* as symbolism; this decision required delicate handling at every step of the performance. There is, for instance, a stage direction in Act Four that Konstantin opens the window and a gust of wind blows into the room. In a realistic production this would be a slight and unnoticeable moment, but in a symbolist production it is an event that you must present strongly so that all the characters and, in turn, the audience experience the strange, premonitory disturbance that Chekhov intends. If you had to name the event, you could describe it baldly as: ‘The writer lets us know that Konstantin will die soon.’ I worked on a mechanism for the window so that, after he had opened it, it continued to bang. We put a large wind machine behind the window so that the curtains billowed. A tray with glasses on it fell off the table as a result of the blast of wind and Konstantin’s papers flew across the room. If this were realism, you would not present it in this manner; it would be a more discreet moment where a window would open a fraction and perhaps one piece of paper would float to the floor.

You could also consider drawing up a list of concrete guidelines about the genre for the actors. For example, with surrealism you could jot down the following list.

It is like being in a dream. Strange things may happen but people might not comment on them, as they would in real life.

You pursue what you want with intensity.

You are often misunderstood by the people you are talking to.

Objects may take on a significance out of proportion with their import.

The physical laws of the universe may be subject to alteration.

Sometimes, it will not be possible to pinpoint the genre with razor-sharp accuracy. You may, for example, read one scene of *The Seagull* and think it is realism, then read another and have the impression that it is symbolism. What matters is that you read the play with both possibilities in mind and see what concrete evidence in the action of the play there is for either view – and then make a clear decision which you follow through thoroughly in the production.

Remember, also, that you can apply the tasks outlined in the previous and forthcoming chapters to any genre of play. Even if the actor is playing Big Foot in a play by Picasso, he needs to know whose foot he belonged to, how he became detached and what he wants at each stage of the action.

Summary

Work out the genre of the play you are going to direct.

Be careful not to direct every play as if it were realism.

Translate the intellectual idea of the genre into things we can see actors do or that entails a concrete change in the environment.

Draw up a list of concrete guidelines for playing the genre.

A checklist of all the work done in this chapter

A list of the basic facts about the writer and brief notes about how these facts shed light on the play

Documentation of how the life of a dead writer informs the play

A list of the ideas underpinning the text

A note of the genre

A list of concrete guidelines for playing the genre

difficult to see what is going on. You should always look for the simplest description possible and one that every character can have a relationship to. Be aware that the title will guide the actors to play the act or scenes in a certain way. The choice is therefore like giving a directing note and will have an incremental effect on their work on the scene.

Here are my titles for each act of *The Seagull*:

Act One: 'The Performance of Konstantin's Play'

Act Two: 'The Entertainment of the Celebrity Guests'

Act Three: 'The Preparation for Arkadina and Trigorin's Departure for Moscow'

Act Four: 'The Gathering to say Final Farewells to Sorin'

Once you have chosen the title cross out the words 'Act One' in your script and replace them with the new title. The title is useful for you, as well as the actors, in reminding you of what is going on. It is easy to get lost in the density of detail that a scene or act contains and forget this simple idea.

Summary

Give a simple name to each act which describes what happens in it.

In your script replace 'Act One', etc., with your new titles.

Events

An event is the moment in the action when a change occurs and this change affects everyone present. 'Event' is really just a simple word for something that happens regularly in life. We regularly find ourselves trying to achieve one thing when something happens which changes what we want to achieve. It can happen when we are alone or it can happen when we are with other people. For example, a couple are on the sofa happily discussing a film they have just seen. Suddenly the man puts his head in the woman's lap, and says 'I can't go on like this'. The woman freezes for a second and takes a sip of her wine. She then sits up and pushes the man's head off her lap. 'I think you should go,' she says. 'I'm so sorry,' says the man. The event is the moment when the man puts his head in the woman's lap and says 'I can't go on with this' and it radically alters what they both want. Initially they both want to have a nice evening. After the event the woman wants the man to leave and the man wants the woman to forgive him.

Events have a whole variety of different forms: they can be sudden (such as if someone threw a stone through a window during a family meal) or gradual (as when a group of people in a remote building slowly realise there is a stalker outside). This 'gradual' event might start with the barely audible crunch of footsteps

on the gravel outside and end with the definite sound of someone trying to unpick the lock of the front door. The responses that people have to these events can be slow or sudden, strong or weak.

On a simple level, a play is a series of changes that take place amongst a group of people. To qualify for 'event' status, a change must affect everyone in the scene in some tangible way. A simple example of an event in *The Seagull* is when Konstantin stops the performance of his play halfway through. Everyone is clearly affected by his action – whether they verbalise their reactions or not.

Analysing a text is about looking for where these changes happen. Go through the whole play and isolate all the events. It is often difficult to find events and it takes time to practise. Be reassured that all entrances and exits are events. This will provide you with a starting point. Do not worry if you cannot see all the events to begin with. The important thing is that you have started to look for the changes in the action. It may help to study events in real life and begin to notice how a change occurs and how it affects what people are doing.

Once located, the events provide you with a way of dividing the text into smaller sections to work on. When I first started directing I wanted to divide the text into small chunks but I did not know how to do it. Arbitrarily I put a line across the script once every two or three pages. I called these sections 'units' or 'beats' and rehearsed them as such. But the place where the line was drawn was not logical or useful to me or to the actors. Sometimes it was a downright hindrance, as it created a false stoppage in the flow of the scene in the actors' minds. It was only when Tatiana Olear taught me about events that I suddenly realised how to divide up the text using events as bookends of each section. For example, my first rehearsal section will begin at Masha and Medvedenko's entrance and last until Konstantin's entrance.

Events don't just alter what the actors play, they also affect what the audience see and often change the tempo of what happens. Using events to structure a play therefore makes things clear for the actor and the audience in equal measure. They are the most essential directing tool in this whole book – determining the variety, shape and life in the overall structure of the performance. When Tatiana introduced me to them in 2000, it was a complete revelation and my ability to structure and shape my work improved hugely. This way of analysing a play has also proved itself to be helpful for actors, because it is based on a simple and readily observable process that happens all the time in life.

Use only pencil when you ringfence an event in the script. Later on in rehearsals, the actors may point out subtle errors you have made and you may need to alter the positioning of an event – or even add a few more.

The text will always contain small and subtle clues that point you towards

After you have done this, put a star by the events that you think might be useful to improvise.

Remember that there are no definitive answers and that you are only working with your impressions of the text. You could, for example, argue for a different trigger event, like Konstantin decides to write the play. The question is whether that would create the most dynamic playing of the scenes that follow and whether it makes sense of everyone's actions; that is a judgement you have to make. Choosing the right trigger event helps the actors enter the play through the right door. The trigger event is also an important one to put on your list of improvisations.

Events can be very useful when you are devising a piece of theatre. Instead of thinking in terms of plotting a story, focus on planning the changes that will occur. Organise your material around these landmarks. They also help when you are directing opera. In particular, choosing the main events in each act helps the singers grade what they are doing.

At the end of this task you should have a script with all the events ringfenced and named. These divisions will break down the text into smaller sections for you to rehearse. I describe how to draw up your rehearsal schedule around these sections in Chapter 11.

Now you are ready to start working on intentions.

Summary

Go through the text and isolate all the events or changes that take place.

Write a simple sentence to describe each event.

Select the main events in each act or series of scenes.

Isolate the pre-play event that sets the action of the play in motion.

Highlight the events which may be useful to improvise.

Intentions

'Intention' is the word that describes what a character wants and whom they want it from. In this process, the characters' intentions only change at events and the analysis of intentions will therefore evolve naturally from your study of events. Before rehearsals begin, try to work out exactly what each character wants in between every event in the play – and from whom.

When you are trying to identify the intentions of the characters, try to see through the surface detail of the words into the thoughts or desires that are motivating those words (or actions, in the case of stage directions). Identifying intentions is like taking an X-ray in which you see the bone structure under the skin.

If a character does not speak in a section between events you must still find an intention for them. People can often use silence in a very active way to have a strong impact on others.

I always find the preparation of intentions an enormously difficult task and I often procrastinate about doing it. This is because I know that the ability to diagnose an intention lies at the heart of the work we do with actors. Work on intentions helps directors to answer the most difficult questions an actor can ask: ‘Why does my character do this?’ and ‘Why does my character say this?’ If I do not prepare intentions, I know that I will waste valuable time in rehearsals debating character motivation. Of course, preparing intentions will not rule out debate entirely but it will definitely limit it to something more helpful and manageable.

Here are some tips about your work on intentions.

First, be careful not to mistake a subject change for a new intention. Characters can change subject repeatedly in order to achieve one intention. For example, in the opening scene of *The Seagull*, Masha changes the subject when she says ‘The show will be starting soon’, but this is just another tactic in her overall intention to get Medvedenko off the subject of love.

Second, remember that intentions have to emerge from the logic of the situation. Sometimes a quick reminder of the title of the act or scene can suddenly help you to see the characters’ intentions more distinctly.

Third, be aware that scenes work best when they contain a simple conflict. So ensure that the intentions contradict, or interact dynamically, with each other. For example, if you are going to ask the actor playing Masha to play the intention ‘to get Medvedenko off the subject of his marriage proposal’, then it might be interesting to give Medvedenko the intention ‘to get Masha to give him an answer to his marriage proposal’. Do not give everyone in a scene the same intention.

Fourth, if you are struggling to identify an emotion, ask yourself what picture the character has in their head of the desired outcome of the intention. That outcome, or future picture, should always involve a change in what the other character or characters do or say. Does the character, for example, want the person that they are talking to do something particular, such as sit down, to go inside or to stop blushing? When Konstantin stops the performance of his play in Act One, does he want the audience to sit silently and feel awful? Or does he want them to get up and storm about, cursing him? If it is the former, then his intention is: to make everyone feel ashamed. If it is the latter, then his intention is: to make everyone frustrated.

Finally, remember that the character may not always be conscious of what they are playing and this will make the task of diagnosing the intention harder. I write more about this issue in Chapter 11, when I describe how to work with actors on

intentions. If you are still finding it hard to find the intentions, it may help to jump forwards in the book now and read the section on the first scene rehearsal in that chapter. Remember that you can practise diagnosing intentions by watching people operate in real life. Observe how they interact and work out what they want behind the words they are saying or try to notice what your intentions are when you interact with others.

When you have isolated an intention, write it down. Do not worry about making beautiful sentences. Use simple words and cool, unemotional language – just like you did when naming events. You will hone the sentence later when you work with the actors. Make sure you write the intentions down in pencil so that you can easily make changes during rehearsals to what you have written. Remember that intentions only change when an event happens: you will need to find an intention for every on-stage character for every section of the play. In *The Seagull*, here are the intentions in the first section between Masha and Medvedenko.

Masha: *To get Medvedenko off the subject of his proposal.*

Medvedenko: *To get Masha to give him an answer to his proposal.*

The event: *Masha informs Medvedenko that she does not love him.*

Masha: *To make Medvedenko feel better.*

Medvedenko: *To convince Masha he is not affected by the rejection.*

Next, look at how each character tries to get what they want. You will notice that characters use a whole range of different tactics. Make sure that you do not get confused between what the character wants – the intention – and how they achieve it – the tactic or means. It is not essential to notate the character's tactics before rehearsals begin, but jot down any particular ones that stand out.

'But how do I work out intentions if there is only one person in the play?', you might ask. First, be aware that it will be very rare for a character to talk directly to 'the audience' who are actually watching the play. So, if you are directing a monologue, simply ask yourself whom the character is talking to. Are they talking to themselves or to another person or people? Are these people or this person imagined or real, dead or alive? Where are these people or this person? Once you have answered these questions, you can ask what the character wants from whom they are talking to. Then, when you rehearse the scene, the actor will need to practise imagining this person or these people.

This way of working has a final refinement that was suggested to me by actors I regularly work with. They said there should be intentions inside many of the events, especially when the events take place over several lines. The actors pointed

out that, if the event is a sudden appearance of an armed gunman, there is no time to play an intention during it, but if the event is the gradual disclosure of a secret (such as Masha telling Dorn about her feelings for Konstantin), then the actors do have time to play a separate intention ‘inside’ the event. The absence of an intention over an event lasting several lines means that the actors have nothing to play and feel that they are just standing around waiting to latch onto their next intention. When you first use this way of working, I suggest that you only prepare intentions between events, but if there are any events that happen over several lines or several seconds, you might like to identify an intention inside the event.

At the end of this exercise your script will now contain events and the intentions that sit between these events (as well as some intentions that happen ‘inside’ events).

Summary

Go through the text to identify and describe the intentions between the events.

Do not mistake a subject change for a new intention.

Remind yourself of the title of the act or scene if you are struggling to identify an intention.

Ensure that the intentions you select will interact dynamically with each other.

Practise diagnosing intentions by watching people operate in real life.

Write down intentions in unemotional and simple sentences.

Start to notice the ‘tactics’ each character uses to play their intentions.

Getting the text ready for the actors

Preparing the rehearsal script is about making a document that is easy for the actors to read and use – and includes space to write notes, events and intentions. Remember that a printed published play script is laid out for people to read and not to use as a rehearsal tool. Consider this when you choose which edition of a classic play you will use. If you decide to photocopy a published play script, think about whether you want to blow up the size of the print or leave blank pages for notes.

The other decision you need to make about the script is what you keep in and what you cut out in terms of stage directions and descriptions about how characters should say lines. Some directors cut all stage directions from the text because they can predetermine the moves and actions of the characters. They also remove all adjectives that precede lines, like ‘angrily’ or ‘through tears’ because these words might put the actor under pressure to deliver slabs of generalised feelings. Others prefer that every stage direction, comma, full stop and adjective that came from the writer’s pen is retained in the text. Alternatively, you might prefer to remove information from the script that is at odds with your interpretation of the play, or your

CHAPTER 5

Deepening work on character

This chapter is about deepening the work on the characters and starting to think about improvisations. It has three steps:

- Characters' thoughts about themselves**
- Relationships**
- Preparing improvisations**

Characters' thoughts about themselves

Chapter 1 describes the building of a biography for each character. A biography allows you to stand on the outside of the character and see what they have done in their lives. Now you need to step inside the characters and look out at the world through their eyes. To do this you need to work out their thought structures.

Our thoughts exist as a collection of sentences or pictures in our heads; these sentences and pictures entered our heads at identifiable points in our lives. Some of our thoughts are relatively new, some are old and some are contradictory. They therefore have different holds on our behaviour. Our collection of thoughts is constantly reshaping itself in response to new stimuli or events in our lives. These thoughts determine how we respond to events in our lives. Imagine, for instance, watching the response of two different drivers to being cut up by another driver at a roundabout. The first driver turns to his passenger and says, 'How frustrating. I wish people would learn to drive properly', then starts to drive erratically himself. The second driver experiences exactly the same event and turns to his passenger and says, 'Poor man. I bet he was late for an urgent hospital appointment or he needed to attend to an emergency at home', and his driving is unaffected. The response to the same event reveals the different thought structures that the two drivers have: the first driver has the thought 'Life is frustrating' and the second driver has the thought 'Life is simple'. You can discover the thought structures of characters in plays just as you can observe them in operation in real life. Pinning down the key thoughts will help you to guide the actors to build more accurate characters with consistent responses to events.

The first thoughts to look at are those a character has about themselves before the action of the play begins. Make a list containing everything that character says about themselves. Make sure you quote the text verbatim and put the page number next to each quote, as you may want to double-check something later on. Actions reveal as much about people's thoughts as words, so add any relevant information from the stage directions (if you intend to use them). Avoid any possible affinities that draw you to one character over another by starting at the top of the dramatis personae and working down. At times it will be difficult to know what to include and what to leave out. If you are in doubt about the relevance of a quote, put it down anyway. Here is a list of quotes for Arkadina.

Act One

For the sake of amusement, I'm prepared to sit through even the ravings of delirium. Because I work, I'm alive to the world around me, I'm always busy; whereas you're such a stuck-in-the-mud, you don't know how to live ... Also I make it a rule not to look into the future. I never think about old age, I never think about death. What will be, will be.

Act Two

Oh, what could be more boring than this sweet country boredom. Heat, quiet, nothing anyone wants to do, everyone philosophising away. It's nice being with you, my friends, it's a pleasure to listen to you, and yet ... to be sitting in a hotel room somewhere learning your lines – could anything be better than that?

Act Three

I suppose I might arrange a little more for clothes [for Konstantin], but as for going abroad. No, at the moment I can't even manage the clothes. [Decisively] I've no money. [Sorin laughs] I haven't!

[On the verge of tears] I've no money! All right, I have money, but I happen to be in the theatrical profession – my outfits alone have nearly ruined me ...

I haven't any money. I'm an actress, not a bank manager.

I'm a woman like any other – you can't speak to me so.

Am I really so old and ugly that you can talk to me about other women without so much as batting an eyelid? [Embraces and kisses him] That last page of my life!

[Kneels] My joy, my pride, my delight ... [Embraces his knees] Leave me for a single hour and I'll never survive it, I'll go mad, my amazing man, my magnificent man, my sovereign lord ...

Act Four *Three baskets of flowers, two garlands and this. [Takes a brooch off her*

breast and throws it on the table] *I was wearing an amazing outfit. Whatever else, I know how to dress.*

[She is alarmed by the sound of the shot] *Oh, it frightened me! It reminded me of the time when ...* [Puts her hands over her face] *I thought for a moment I was going to faint ...*

Now distil these quotes into a series of nouns and adjectives that can be added to the sentence, 'I am ...' Do this by asking the question: 'What are the simplest thoughts that someone who says this has about themselves?' Ask this question of each quote you have written down and then find an accurate word as an answer. For example, on page 42 of the play, you may look at Arkadina's trembling when Trigorin says he wants to go off with Nina and get the impression that 'I am ageing' is one of Arkadina's thoughts about herself. You should end up with a list of four or five key 'thoughts' for each character. Arkadina's thoughts might be: I am a bad mother, a survivor, ageing, a great artist, worthless, poor. Try to avoid thoughts that are value judgements that someone outside the person might make about them. Instead, try to get inside the person's head and think from their point of view. Start to use the sorts of words that they would use.

If you are having difficulties identifying the character's thoughts about themselves, look back over the sketch biography and search for events in the characters' lives that may have generated those thoughts. For example, by focusing on the hardship Arkadina experienced early on in her career performing at the agricultural fair in Poltava in 1873 and, later, when she lived in a tenement in Moscow, it becomes evident that the thought 'I am poor' must figure quite strongly in how that character understands herself.

Summary

List everything that a character says about themselves during the action of the play. Boil down the list of quotes to some simple nouns and adjectives to finish the sentence 'I am ...'

If you are having difficulties identifying the characters' thoughts about themselves, look back over the sketch biography and search for events in the characters' lives that may have generated those thoughts.

Relationships

Before you begin rehearsals, it is worth finding out what the character thinks of each of the other characters prior to the action of the play. This task helps you look at the text as a web of interrelated relationships between characters and stops you directing it from one character's point of view.

Start from the top of the dramatis personae and work through each character, writing down everything they say about all the other characters in turn. Transfer the lists of quotes to different pages and organise them under separate headings like this:

Arkadina's thoughts about Konstantin

Arkadina's thoughts about Sorin

Arkadina's thoughts about Nina ... and so on.

Remember to add the page references next to each quote. Make sure that you look at all the relationships, including relationships between the main characters and the minor characters such as servants. If the character says nothing or very little about another character, study the scenes in which they are on stage together and see if you can tease out any additional information. Alternatively you could jot down the simplest impression the text gives you of the relationship, before adding it to your list. Again, remember that there is not a definitive set of quotes for each relationship that you should be aiming at; this list will always vary from director to director.

When you have finished this process, boil everything down to simple adjectives or nouns and add them to the sentences: '*Konstantin is...*', '*Sorin is ...*', '*Nina is ...*' and so on. This way of notating thoughts helps you stay inside the character's head. Do this for each character in turn. Here are Arkadina's thoughts about two other characters.

Sorin is my brother, mean, dying, a failure.

Konstantin is a burden, a nonentity, unemployed, a parasite, my own dear child.

Notice that characters, like people in life, have contradictions in their heads about each other; this is certainly the case with Arkadina's thoughts about her son. Try not to iron out these contradictions as they can help an actor with, for example, their character's inconsistent behaviour.

Sometimes the interaction of characters in a play is brief or non-existent. In these cases it is difficult to diagnose what the characters think about each other. Be simple and list the most obvious things they might think. For example, in *The Seagull* Polina and Arkadina barely interact and yet Arkadina must have thoughts in her head about Polina. At the very least she would think that Polina is the housekeeper, Shamrayev's wife and her contemporary. In the action Arkadina goes into town with Polina in Act Two and forgets to pick up the plums that Polina gives her for the journey in Act Three. Here is an example of how you can boil all this down into a simple sentence:

Polina is a servant, a bad mother, an old friend, old, bullied, dull.

Summary

Compile a list of what each character thinks of every other character.
Boil down the list of quotes into simple adjectives and nouns.

Preparing improvisations

The aim of improvisations is to build pictures of the past that will support what the characters do and say in the present action of the play. In *The Seagull*, Masha and Medvedenko need a shared picture of Medvedenko's recent proposal of marriage before they can play the first scene and, behind this, they need a picture of how they first met. In the same scene, Medvedenko needs a clear picture of the family life he talks about as well as a picture of the circumstances of his father's death or disappearance. Similarly, Konstantin needs past pictures of his mother to underpin his long chat about her with Sorin in Act One. He needs a picture of her reciting Nekrasov, ministering to the sick and acting. The improvisations you do should reconstruct these events and thereby lodge a lasting and concrete picture of what happened in the actors' minds – almost as if it were an actual memory. These pictures will then determine how their relationships are played in the action of the play or how the characters talk about the past. You can use improvisations of the action that occurs in between scenes to fuel subsequent scenes.

Your work on character biographies, the trigger event, immediate circumstances and events in between scenes will provide you with a list of all the things you can usefully improvise. In an ideal world, you would have a long rehearsal period and you would be able to improvise everything on your list. In a shorter rehearsal period, you may have to select key events; this is the moment to make that selection. If you have very little time, focusing solely on the trigger event can often provide you with lots of material for improvisations. If you were working on the trigger event of *The Seagull*, you could improvise the following events (or a selection of these events).

In Moscow, Arkadina asks Trigorin if he would like to come on holiday with her in the summer.

Arkadina's letter announcing her and Trigorin's arrival on the estate is delivered and discussed by Polina, Sorin, Shamrayev, Konstantin and Masha at breakfast.

Konstantin sits in the study and begins some sketches for a play to perform when Trigorin and Arkadina arrive.

Konstantin asks Nina to be in his play and they do a read-through.

Polina, Masha and the servants plan the jobs they need to do before the arrival of

Trigorin and Arkadina.

Konstantin asks Shamrayev for help building the set for his performance.

Arkadina arrives on the estate.

Even if you only have time to do three of these improvisations, it will help the actors enormously in their work on the scenes.

The best way to direct an improvisation is to structure it well. When I first started directing I gave very few instructions. Consequently, the improvisations were very long: nothing much happened in them and the actors regularly slipped in and out of character. Avoid this sort of outcome by planning improvisations as if they were scenes from a play, giving the actors immediate circumstances, events, intentions, and a clear sense of place and time. The more concrete the information you can provide for each improvisation, the better – and remember that actors can cope with more information than you might imagine. If you structure your improvisations clearly, you will also reduce the gap between doing improvisations and working on scenes in the play. When you come to rehearse the scenes themselves, they will feel like improvisations.

Here is the plan for the improvisation of Medvedenko's proposal to Masha.

Place: *The library on Sorin's estate.*

Time: *1893, August. Sunday. 11am. It is very hot.*

Immediate circumstances: *Medvedenko is returning a book he borrowed from Masha yesterday. It is Shakespeare's Hamlet. Medvedenko has walked three miles in his best suit from home. He is a little hot and sweaty. His family expect him back for lunch. This morning he had an argument with his mother about the weekly house-keeping. She was particularly angry because of his expenditure on cigarettes. Masha is reading Schopenhauer in the library in order to impress Konstantin with her knowledge – he brought up this philosopher the evening before. She has the window open because of the heat. She has an hour off before she will have to help her mother with the lunch. Konstantin is away shooting all morning, Shamrayev is working in the fields preparing the harvest, Polina is in the kitchen and Sorin is writing letters in his study.*

Masha's first intention: *To get Medvedenko to entertain her.*

Medvedenko's intention: *To prepare Masha for the proposal.*

The event: *Medvedenko proposes to Masha.*

Masha's second intention: *To get Medvedenko to give her time to think about the proposal.*

Medvedenko's second intention: *To get Masha to give him a clear answer immediately.*

You can also plan very simple improvisations such as one that will help Nina with her relationship with Trigorin.

Place: *Nina's bedroom.*

Time: *1892, March, 4.30pm.*

Immediate circumstances: *Her stepmother and father have just left to go shopping in town which gives her an opportunity to work on her Trigorin scrapbook. This morning she received a monthly literary magazine from Moscow with a new story by Trigorin called 'In the Summer Moonlight', about a hopeless love affair in the Russian steppes. She read it over breakfast and now she is cutting it out of the magazine and pasting it into her Trigorin scrapbook. The room is quite chilly.*

Nina's first intention: *To entertain herself.*

The event: *The paste spills over the scrapbook.*

Nina's second intention: *To stop herself from panicking.*

This planned improvisation is not as dynamic as a scene from a play (and may even be a little dull to watch) but it will give the actor a clear picture of what Trigorin writes, his status and how important he is to her. As a result it will help her when she says lines in Act One, such as 'Such wonderful stories he writes' and 'I don't mind your mother, I'm not afraid of her, but you've got Trigorin here ...' It will also help her play the scene where she meets him for the first time.

Prepare all the improvisations you have decided to do in exactly the same way. Remember that a well-organised improvisation can take ten minutes to do, whereas a conversation in rehearsals about the same event can take half an hour. Bear this in mind when you are deciding how many events to improvise. Put each planned improvisation on a separate sheet of A4 paper and arrange them in chronological order.

Summary

Select the improvisations you are able to do in the time you have to rehearse.

Prepare the content of all the improvisations and structure them as if they were scenes from a play.

Put the plans for each improvisation on separate sheets of A4 paper so you can find them easily when you are in rehearsals.

A checklist of all the work done in this chapter

A list of words describing each character's thoughts about themselves

A list of each character's thoughts about all the other characters

A list of all the events you plan to improvise

A series of plans for each improvisation arranged in chronological order