

Blue Remembered Hills

by Dennis Potter

You will need to concentrate on the following:

1. The historical period and the theatrical conventions of the period.
 2. The style of the play.
 3. Characters – interpretation, motivation, vocal aspects, movement and interaction, their use of the acting space, their use of props and set, their costume, make-up and hair and the relationship between the actors and the audience.
 4. Staging – the effect of the production on different stages e.g. Thrust, Proscenium, Theatre in the Round and Traverse.
 5. Design – the set and props, costumes, make-up and hair, lighting and sound.
- Remember that the floor, the stage and the roof are important.
 - The walls behind the audience can also be used.
2. Although it is usually the director who makes the decisions regarding staging, it is necessary to work with the designers.
 - Can you name each designer?
 - What is the role of each designer?
 - Remember that the designers add to the atmosphere of the performance and enrich the audience's experience.

(More information and terminology regarding designers can be found in the appendix.)

CLASS DISCUSSION TASKS

Before you start to study the drama, you need to remember some things that will help you with each task.

1. Staging
There are four main types of stage layouts: Proscenium, Thrust, Traverse and Theatre in the Round.
 - Make a sketch of each one.
 - Add where the audience will be placed.
 - Propose an idea of the kind of set that can be used on each stage.
3. You must remember that vocal skills, movement and interaction have to be discussed when discussing a performance. Do you remember all the different elements which must be referred to when discussing each one?
4. You must understand the meaning of the term **style**. Can you explain what is the meaning of naturalistic style, symbolic style and minimalistic style?

1: The background of the play

Originally, *Blue Remembered Hills* by the playwright Dennis Potter was a TV play. It was first performed in 1979 as part of the *Play for Today* series on the BBC. Shortly afterwards, the script was adapted for the stage. A large number of performances of the play have been staged since – both amateur and professional.

“When we dream of childhood,” said Dennis Potter, “we take our present selves with us. It is not the adult world writ small: childhood is the adult world writ large.”

The play follows a group of seven-year-old children playing in the Forest of Dean one afternoon. However, laughter turns to tears as the play concludes with the death of one child, Donald, who is burned alive.

One particular feature is that the characters are played by adults. The playwright uses the same technique in other plays as well. The play is set in 1943, during the Second World War, and this of course is the background to the play.

The play has an autobiographical element as Potter himself was brought up in the area and had played similar games to these characters as a child. His intention is to draw the audience into the innocent, funny, but sometimes horrific world of the children. He does this to remind the audience of the simplicity of childhood. The fun of keeping a tadpole in a jar: the awful feeling of going to school after having a new hair style! We have all felt those feelings and still feel them from time to time.

The themes are timeless ones that we all experience when growing up – it makes no difference in which period or time.

Discuss in your class times when you were afraid to go to school when you were young, and times when something incredible happened. Do you remember sad or happy times? Do these appear funny or less important to you now?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kNQPRNCyVeA>

2: The original performance

The play takes place in the woods, a field and an old barn. The period of the play – that is, 1943 during the Second World War – is also important. The characters’ background is unique as they were brought up hearing the sounds of war and with their fathers absent as role models. They belong to the working class, and they don’t have many material possessions. As a result, they are entertained by the simple things in life.

The drama was originally performed by the National Theatre in 1996 on the proscenium stage of the Lyttleton Theatre. At that time, the performance’s style was as naturalist and realistic as possible, with the set reflecting the locations, the costumes and the props in a traditional style which conjured up the atmosphere of the time perfectly. The director, Patrick Marber, decided not to have an interval so that the audience was fully drawn into the children’s world. Despite this, a number of techniques were used to encourage the audience to think about the themes as well, e.g. siren and bomb sound effects to remind them of the horrors of war. Sound was most important in the performance and conjured up the mood of the period most effectively. The lighting reflected the atmosphere as well and varied between a fine afternoon and the tragedy of the fire at the end.

Here are some of the press comments on the production:

“The National Theatre offers us *Blue Remembered Hills* in a production by Patrick Marber that is bold, arresting, funny, painful and open to question... The most immediately striking feature of this production is Richard Hudson’s design, which reimagines the idyllic scene as a sort of children’s model of a farmyard, with toy trees and plastic animals.”

“You can see that Patrick Marber wants to lull us into thinking the play is going to be amusing, self-conscious and pantomimic, to make the disaster in the barn hit like a whiplash. The roar of the fire, the flames (real ones) and collapsing roof timbers are exceptionally naturalistic, and sharply different in style from the rest of the direction, where the children chase each other above the sky, and in the end are left standing up there, denying responsibility for the tragedy, while Michael Gambon’s voice is heard reading, indistinctly, Housman’s poem from

which the title comes... In the closing moments laughter freezes, but either Marber's direction or the play itself makes the end less anguished if the catastrophe is known beforehand."

It should also be noted that Potter wished to use adults to play the parts, rather than children – not to create humour, but to lessen the audience's sympathy towards the characters. We can have a natural sentimental response when watching children performing at times, and the playwright didn't want that.

In this production, adults were seen portraying children, and they succeeded in doing so in a very realistic way.

What do you think of this?

Look at these pictures of The Bench Theatre's production and notice their costumes and also their posture, their gestures and facial expression.





DISCUSSION TASKS

Do you think that providing so much detail helps the actors and the director when preparing a performance? Do you think it's important to stick to Potter's ideas, or can they be adapted for a contemporary audience? Can a more symbolic and naturalistic performance be created? Can the period be shifted, and the characters set in a totally different time?

The drama takes place during one afternoon. There are no flashbacks or moving from one time to another. This also supports the realistic atmosphere of the piece.

Throughout the play, Potter provides a clear picture of the situations and locations in his detailed stage directions, e.g. Scene 5:

The old barn. Nearby. Same time. Wooden. Cobwebs at a broken window. A scatter of tools. A wheelbarrow. An old feeding trough. A big pile of hay. A cartwheel, etc.

Also, when introducing the characters:

Two seven-year-old girls. Angela, pretty, with ringlet curls and blue ribbons, and Audrey, who is plain, with cheap owl-like metal-framed glasses and short, straight hair; are "playing house" with the splay-footed, timid, anaemic-looking boy nicknamed Donald Duck, who has shoes or boots, but no socks. He also has nasty scabs round his mouth...

Potter is clear in his descriptions of how he imagines seeing the play being staged. He even emphasises the props and the stage equipment:

...a battered, squeaking old pram with a buckled wheel, which holds a chocolate-coloured china doll...

This is also clearly seen in the stage directions which draw attention to the characters' movements, gestures and postures. There is also enough information here for the actors to get insight into the motivation of the characters.

3: Structure

There are 29 scenes, moving quickly from one to the next, especially towards the end of the play. The timing and tempo must be fast here in order to build up to the final tragedy. The locations change consistently, but we do revisit them from time to time. The dialogue is lively and colloquial and there is a true sense of a historical period here.

TASKS

Look at Scene 4.

1. Draw a picture of the stage you would choose for this extract, showing where the audience is placed. Then, describe how you would stage the extract on your choice of stage, concentrating on:

- the production style
- your choice of set and props.

State the reasons for your choices.

2. Draw a picture of the costume of the character of Willie in this extract. (Remember to include references to the period, material, colour and texture.) Then, explain how you would convey Willie's role to the audience in the scene. In your answer, refer to the following:

- character motivation
- character's voice
- character's movement

- his positioning on stage
- his relationship with the audience.

4: The characters

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9l4jFG-DBMY>

There are seven characters in all, and you can research to see how they are portrayed in different productions.

Willie – A fairly laid-back character, but intelligent and devious. He enjoys imitating aeroplanes and so body language is very important when portraying this character: his gestures, posture and facial expression, especially the eyes.

Peter – A strong, less intelligent character who acts aggressively – a bully. Again, body language would be imperative for the actor when portraying him, e.g. he might use his fists consistently.

Raymond – A sensitive and innocent character who stammers, and he's younger than the rest. He enjoys playing cowboys and using his plastic gun whilst imitating them.

John – A character who tries to be fair and caring of his brother Raymond, and who challenges Peter at times. He's more diplomatic than the rest and tries to calm things down in order to avoid arguments. He has a more ethical attitude than the rest.

Angela – A most 'girlie' and confident character who can be selfish. She tries to get her own way all the time and uses her femininity to achieve this. She has to play "mummy" every time. Her doll is very important to her.

Audrey – A character who is reliant on others, and who tries hard to be Angela's friend. She's insecure and unpopular, but cruel and aggressive as well.

Donald Duck – A character on the group's fringes. He doesn't fit in. He's being abused by his mother. He's lonely and frustrated, unpopular with the boys, but the girls let him play with them. He scratches his body consistently but tries to hide his scars under his clothes.

These pictures provide you with a traditional illustration and interpretation of the characters. Who would you choose to portray in a performance of the play?





Ideas for short questions 1–3 in the examination paper

Look at Scene 13.

1. Briefly describe the relationship between Donald and Peter in this extract.
2. Which two practise techniques could the director use to help the actors examine the relationship between both characters? Give reasons for your choices.
3. Suggest suitable costume, hair and make-up for both characters and explain your choices.
4. Describe two suitable sound effects you could use in this extract.
5. How would the character of Peter say the following line? State your reasons for your voice choices: *“Quack! Quack! Quack! Goo on, flap your wings!”*
6. As an actor, choose one movement, one gesture and one facial expression to convey the character of Donald in this extract.
7. Describe two suitable lighting effects you could use in this extract.
8. As a designer, name the props both actors would use in this extract. Then, describe the props, (colour, quality, period) and explain how the actors would use them.

Ideas for question 4 in the examination paper

1. Describe how you would stage this extract in a performance of the play *Blue Remembered Hills*. In your answer, refer to the following:

- your choice of stage
- the style of the production
- your choice of set and props.

Give reasons for your choices.

2. As a designer, explain how you would use a **Thrust Stage** to stage this extract. You will also need to refer to the original production. In your answer, refer to the following:

- audience placement
- the style of the production
- your ideas on lighting and sound
- your ideas on set and props.

(You may adapt the shape of the stage, choosing either a **Proscenium, Theatre in the Round or Traverse stage** in order to practise every possible option.)

3. Explain how an actor portraying the part of Peter would use physical skills to communicate the character to the audience (you can change the character to Donald). In your answer, refer to the following:
 - character motivation in this extract
 - movement and gesture
 - posture
 - facial expressions.
4. Explain how an actor portraying the part of Donald would use vocal skills to communicate the character to the audience (you can change the character to Peter). In your answer, refer to the following:
 - character motivation in this extract
 - tone and tempo
 - pitch.
5. Describe how the actors would use the stage and interact in this extract. In your answer, refer to the following:
 - the shape of the stage and the space

- character positioning in the space
- characters' gestures, their posture and their facial reactions.

Important – When studying the role of each character in the play, remember that you have to consider the characters' age, background and social status. In addition to this, as you choose a specific extract, concentrate on the character's motivation in that extract and read the stage directions carefully in order to get more information.

PERFORMING TASKS

Choose a specific extract, possibly one which is very important in the play.

1. In a group or with a partner, discuss what is the relationship between all of the characters.
2. What are the motivations of the characters in the extract?
3. How would they use the space, and remember, in order to do so, you must consider the shape of the stage. Discuss and experiment with the movements and the interaction in the extract.
4. You can consider proxemics – the distance and proximity between the characters.
5. Carefully consider your character's gesture, posture and gait.
6. Consider your use of voice, tone, tempo and pitch.
7. Remember that your interpretation is unique, but you must give the playwright's intention full consideration.

As you practise the extract, you can improvise and use different techniques, e.g. hot seating, in order to try and get to know the character better. Consider the following questions:

- Who am I?
- Where am I?
- When is it happening?
- What do I want?

- Why do I want it?
- How will I get it?
- What do I need to overcome?

Perform the extract in front of the class, to get their response. You can explain to them your reasons for your vocal choices, your movements and the interaction.

MORE GENERAL TASKS

1. Look at Scene 28 from the play and, as a director, what are your ideas regarding staging this scene? In your answer, refer to the following:
 - the original performance
 - your choice of stage
 - the style of the production
 - your choice of set and props
 - your choice of lighting
 - your choice of sound and music
 - your choice of costumes, hair and make-up.

(Only around four of the above will come up in an examination question.)
2. Look at a specific extract of the play that explores the theme of cruelty in the play and, as a director, how would you stage this scene, e.g. Scene 4? In your answer, refer to the following:
 - your choice of stage
 - the style of the production
 - your ideas on set and props
 - your ideas on lighting
 - your ideas on sound and music
 - your ideas on costumes, hair and make-up.

(Only around four of the above will come up in an examination question.)

3. Look at Scene 5. As a director, what are your ideas regarding staging this scene? In your answer, refer to the following:

- your choice of stage
- the style of the production
- your choice of set and props
- your choice of lighting
- sound and music
- costumes, hair and make-up.

(Only around four of the above will come up in an examination question.)

5: Themes

A number of themes are highlighted within the play e.g. friendship, family, poverty and loneliness. However, the main themes are cruelty and war.

Cruelty

Bullying happens on many levels in this play – physical bullying and emotional bullying. Not only are the children cruel to each other, but also to animals e.g. in Scene 6, the boys, Peter and Raymond, kill a squirrel and enjoy doing so. After killing it, they even want to cut its tail off! Does this not raise questions and some concerns regarding the children's mental state? One could say that the squirrel is a symbol of Donald Duck who is also being tortured and abused by the rest of the children. This scene may also predict his death. However, the physical and consistent bullying is central to the play. Possibly each of them had experienced some kind of abuse at home but Donald is the most obvious one. He is regularly beaten by his mother, e.g. Scene 5, where Angela says about Donald's mum,

"...She hits you with the poker, don't she!"

Unfortunately, the children behave like and imitate the adults. It must also be remembered that there are no adults around to supervise their actions. The children are free to behave as they wish.

DISCUSSION TASKS

Do you feel that the parents are to blame for the children's behaviour or are they old enough to understand the difference between good and bad? Can children be as cruel as this towards each other, or is the situation being overdramatised in this play? Are children today similar or dissimilar to this play's children?

The impact of war

The period of the play is of paramount importance. The children are used to the sound of bombs, sirens and guns. Some of their fathers are away fighting in the war and the boys especially view this as a very brave thing. "*Playing war*" is an exciting game for them – imitating the sound of the aeroplanes, the bombs and the explosions. This is the irony, in the middle of war's terrible nightmares, the children view elements of it as being exciting and romantic.

Willie and Peter create fantasy games that they are soldiers and are killing the enemy. This becomes an obsession, and although they are friends at times, they also fight – Peter throws his fists and Willie shouts nasty words. However, after a while, both have forgotten their fights and carry on playing and speaking as they were. This is typical of children. They can easily forgive and forget. While the boys play war, the girls are "*playing house*", and although the girls argue, they demonstrate a strong friendship. They compete for the boys' attention but, really, their relationship is important to them. However, for the boys, the most important thing is who is the strongest and bravest, and they are willing to fight physically to gain this status.

The play's greatest tragedy is that Donald Duck imagines that there is a "*prisoner of war*" who has escaped into the woods. By trying to hide, his obsession with fire along with his fragile mental condition contribute to his death. Although the children realise what's happening, it's too late to save Donald. Although Raymond demonstrates guilt and sympathy, everyone else refuses to take responsibility and believe that they are not to blame. The intention of this is that Potter suggests that the children's attitude is similar to adults' attitude at times. Children aren't always angels, and they can cause evil and misery to the same extent as adults.

Denial and distancing oneself from tragedy and problems is something that both the children's world and the adult's world have in common.

DISCUSSION TASKS

Do you agree with Potter's opinion or are children, in your opinion, always innocent?

Which other themes are highlighted to you?

TASKS

1. Work with a partner and make a list of scenes where the themes of war or cruelty is obvious. You can experiment with performing a specific extract, concentrating on the characters' voices and movements. You can use different practise techniques to develop the characters e.g. hot seating, levels to demonstrate power, improvisation, dividing the extract up into units to discuss character motivation, mime work and freeze-frames.
2. As a set designer, create a model of the set you would use. Concentrate on colours, materials and levels. You may choose to use a screen, a projector or moveable equipment such as rostra. Remember, you must first select your stage.
3. As a costume, make-up and hair designer, create ideas on how you would dress the seven characters. Consider colour, material/fabric, quality, period, style of hair, make-up and any jewellery. Give reasons for your choices.
4. As a sound and lighting designer, choose a specific extract of the play e.g. Scene 23, 25, 26, 27 and 28. You may discuss the type of sound or music which would be appropriate to create atmosphere in the extract and also the types of lighting, i.e. gels, lanterns, on-screen images, special effects, gobos, intensity and colour.
5. As a director, how would you go about presenting the different locations in the play? Consider the shape of the stage, the size of the space, the set and the stage equipment.
6. As a director, would you choose a symbolic style or a more naturalistic style to stage this play? Give your reasons and refer to a few scenes.

6: Contemporary productions

There have been many memorable performances in the past e.g. in 1996, the original play was directed by Patrick Marber in the National Theatre in London. It's a play which is also performed regularly by amateur theatre companies. Of course, it can be staged in a number of styles – traditionally or in a more contemporary manner using modern costumes and a less complicated set. Despite this, most of the productions concentrate on the original period and the traditional style. See the performance of Off Centre Theatre in Monmouth in 2017 which is naturalistic and authentic.

The Northern Stage production in Newcastle in 2014 had a bare set and very few furniture – it was different but striking. This play is also popular to perform as a part of the GCSE and A Level examinations.

Although it's useful to look at versions from the past (and many do exist), remember that your individual and original ideas are just as important. You can borrow some ideas as you discuss and study the planning elements and then create your final version of every element of the staging. Remember that you need to remember how the play was originally staged and what the playwright's intention was.

Perhaps you can also look at the 1979 television version (on DVD) to get ideas about every aspect of the play.

TASKS

Conduct research into previous productions of the play. Experiment with different types of stages e.g. Thrust, Proscenium, Theatre in the Round, Traverse or others of your own choice (special setting).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9l4jFG-DBMY>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XdprwS921Mg>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kNQPRNCyVeA>

Ideas for question 5 in the examination paper – 15 marks

1. With reference to a key extract of the play, how would a designer choose to use lighting and sound to communicate the mood to an audience? In your answer, refer to the following:
 - how were lighting and sound used in the original production
 - ideas on lighting
 - ideas on sound
 - mood.
2. With reference to a key extract of the play, explain how you would communicate the role of any one of the characters to the audience. In your answer, refer to the following:
 - character motivation
 - voice
 - movement
 - interaction.

Give your reasons for your choices.

3. With reference to a key extract of the play, explain how a designer would use a set to communicate mood to an audience. In your answer, refer to the following:
 - the original production
 - your ideas on the shape of the stage
 - the style of the production
 - your ideas regarding a set.

Give your reasons for your choices.

4. With reference to a key extract of the play, explain how a designer would use costumes, hair and make-up to communicate mood to an audience. In your answer, refer to the following:
 - the original production
 - your ideas on costume style, their colour, their quality and the period
 - your ideas on hair and make-up.

Give your reasons for your choices.

5. With reference to a key extract of the play, explain how the actors would interact to communicate their relationship to an audience. In your answer, refer to the following:
 - the acting style
 - the movements
 - gestures and posture
 - facial expression.

Give your reasons for your choices.

APPENDIX

Terminology

Vocal skills

Pitch
Tone
Tempo
Pause
Accent
Voice level
Clarity
Emphasis

Physical skills

Gesture
Posture
Facial expressions – eyes
Movement – gait
Stillness

Interaction

Proxemics – distance and proximity
Positioning on stage
Physical response

Costume, make-up and hair design

Material
Quality
Colour
Time period
Hair style
Wigs
Make-up
Jewellery

Sound design

Music
Sound effects
Live sounds
Recorded sounds
Volume
Echo
Microphones
Sound sources
Instruments
Live band

Lighting design

Intensity
Focus
Angles
Special effects
Colour – gels
Gobos
Different lanterns

Set design

Shape of stage
Flats
Backcloth / back drop
Cyclorama
Colour
Rostra
Exits, entrances
Levels – blocks
Floor
Curtains
Ceiling
Stage equipment
Furniture e.g. table
Stairs

Personal props

Handheld
Portable props, e.g. chair or box

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resources@wjec.co.uk