

A LEVEL THEATRE STUDIES

Component 2

Creating Original Drama

Working Notebook Performer

DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE

*By James Maclean
Playing multiple roles.*

Influencing Practitioner
Bertolt Brecht



Candidate and centre number

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Section One: Ideas, Rational and Research. Word Count – 1,267

Rationale and Research

The initial stimulus that inspired our piece was the song *White Rabbit* by Jefferson Airplane, a band from the 1960s Psychedelic Rock scene. The song is a metaphor for drugs and the spiralling descent they can cause. This song inspired us to base our piece on the dangers of drug abuse, specifically how drugs can have a devastating impact on people from all walks of life, regardless of their economic or social background. During our research into accounts from real drug abuse victims, we reflected on this quote from the playwright, Sarah Kane: "There's not a drug on earth that can make life meaningful". This was powerful as it delves into how drugs do not fix any of your problems, merely postpones them, and does not give your life any further purpose. To explore this theme, we decided on our influencing practitioner being Bertolt Brecht as the issues are socially, politically, and economically pressing. We want our audience to consider drug usage both today and historically as a pressing matter that needs addressing. The Brechtian style naturally appealed to us because we wanted to create both a 'Didactic' and 'Dialectical' piece of theatre, whereby, we are able to 'preach' the danger of using drugs as well as encouraging the audience to observe objectively, ponder and develop a strong social call to action that will prevent others from falling into the dangerous trap of drugs.

Wider Research

As our piece is focused on the impact of drugs on a wider spectrum, we thought it would be beneficial to research the historicization of the issue. For example, we looked into the historical and cultural aspect of man's relationship with addictive drugs and discovered that this began as early as the 17th Century when people began to question the addictive nature of substances and the loss of control they incited. Historically, substances were used by all areas of economic society, whether the priests for religious services, healers for medicinal purposes and/or members of society for recreational use. By researching various articles, we learned that no one was 'safe' from the addictions and dangers of drug abuse. We wanted to understand why people became attracted to drugs when the effects can be so catastrophic. We learned that it did not just affect users of recreational drugs but all people from different backgrounds. I read an article about the 1950's housewives and their overuse of anti-depressants, and a doctor overusing prescription drugs to cope with work. We also looked at verbatim narratives on social media about the common urban user, and how one drug can spiral into another. We wanted to understand how Governments are working to stop the spread of drug abuse in society. In particular, how American and Latin American Countries are trying to tackle the issue of illegal drug smuggling. I researched the Drug Cartels of Mexico, and how they carry out huge underground operations while also posing as a dangerous threat to the public.

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Live Theatre Research

For research, we watched Live Theatre. We watched a play on National Theatre called *The Container*, a story about asylum seekers being smuggled across Europe inside a shipping container. It was written by Clare Bayley, directed by Tom Wright, and was filmed in a shipping container parked outside the Old Vic Theatre. We felt this was worthwhile watching as it covers controversial topics in

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a grounded way. The set, being an actual shipping container, gave the play a very cramped and claustrophobic feel. The only lighting used was from outside the container doors and torches used by the cast. After seeing this, we were inspired to consider handheld lighting for our performance. The play had many shocking moments, for example when one of the characters excretes. Faecal matter is quite a taboo subject in any form of media, similar to our theme, therefore it was interesting to explore the shock-horror effect of it. We were inspired by the heavy themes of the play, such as the contrast between cynicism and optimism, featured in the cynical young man who knows how refugee situations turn out, and the naïve young girl who pictures England as friendly place where she will work for the Queen.

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Practitioner Research

Whilst Brecht was the practitioner we decided on for our piece, we did entertain the thought of some others. Frantic Assembly, who specialise in using movement and choreography in order to portray a message or story, were considered. However, we decided against this as an overly symbolic piece could be easily misinterpreted, which is always an issue with a serious topic such as this. Brecht, on the other hand, was our preferred choice, as his didactic as well as dialectic approach to theatre complimented our piece. Brecht believed that 'art is not a mirror through which to reflect the world, but a hammer with which to shape it'. This viewpoint aligns with our piece as we wanted to put across the warnings of the dangers of drugs clearly, as well as allowing the audience to come to that decision themselves. In fact, one of Brecht's aims was to stop the audience from 'hanging up their brains with their hats' as they enter the theatre and remain objectively conscious about what they are seeing on the stage.

Commented [AC8]: redundant - stick to rationale for why you chose Brecht

Commented [AC9]: could this be better expressed? communicate how drugs and addiction ultimately tear lives and relationships apart?

Commented [AC10]: we want our audience to consider that this is an urgent societal disease that needs urgent intervention?

Stylistic Factors

In Brecht's approach to Epic Theatre, he was often known to incorporate social and political messages into his plays, didactic or dialectic Lehrstucks. We were inspired by this in our piece, including scenes that were didactic, e.g., the ending scene where we speak directly to the audience. He had a very episodic approach, using social truths in a journalistic style, which perfectly portrays his Communist and Marxist views. Some other techniques of his we researched were montage, where the piece would feature many small-contained stories, and accents, such as Received Pronunciation (RP), Scottish, American etc. We incorporated this into our piece through our different self-contained stories relating to our theme, for example our segment with the Doctor. We also were inspired by Brecht's use of accents, such as Scottish and London accents. Another stylistic factors we researched and was particularly inspired by was his use of placards to mark the passage of time or unsaid information, one of Brecht's most prominent themes, that performances could be read. We used Brecht's idea of placards in our piece in a more modern way, incorporating them onto a slideshow projected behind us, instead of physically holding them.

Commented [AC11]: lehrstucks were unashamedly didactic not really dialectical- his career took on this approach later- check your research

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Dramatic Aims and Intentions

With our piece, our main dramatic intention was to educate the audience on the danger of drugs, by exploring that addiction can happen to anyone, not just relating to more common class A drugs, such as cannabis, cocaine, or heroin, but also fewer common drugs such as prescription medication. We want the audience to realise (to quote Bishop Desmond Tutu) 'there comes a point where we need

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Commented [AC17]: we did not want to simply present our spectators with the notion of street drugs but also to split the focus to consider addiction to prescribed meds

to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they're falling in.

My personal dramatic aims as an actor are to create an obvious distinction between each of my multiple roles throughout the piece, physically and vocally. I aim to utilise many different accents to achieve this, for example, a Glasgow Scottish accent for the 'Heroin User', a Leeds Bradford accent for 'Trevor' at Border control the and a Cockney London accent for the 'Pushers'. I intend for my physicality to be very different between scenes, for example, refined and clinical during the prologue, stiff upper lip and upright during the housewife scene, and loose and droopy during the PSA scene. Another aim is to make the audience laugh using spass for comedic effect, as well as shocking the audience with my more serious moments.

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Commented [AC19]: present expressionistic archetypes

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Section Two. Word Count – 1,974

Devising Approach

We identified with the work of Brecht in the approach to devising our piece as someone who was instrumental in shocking the audience into change. We brainstormed different ideas between us based on our research and came up with various topics for scenes we wanted to include. We further developed these ideas into full scenes, creating an episodic formula to our piece. We took an episodic approach because using small, self-contained stories helped to show the wide spectrum of the issue, instead of focusing on just one individual narrative throughout, which we felt wouldn't best represent our message. This links to our practitioner, Brecht, who often incorporated an episodic approach to his plays.

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Developing Ideas

We started by creating a prologue in keeping with Brecht. We wanted to create a shock provocation scene and took inspiration from his ideas of performances being read. We decided to incorporate our stimulus song, *White Rabbit*, into the prologue as this relates to Brecht's technique of using song or music. We also researched and tried out other songs for our prologue, such as *Golden Brown* by The Strangers, and *Where is my Mind* by The Pixies. For example, Eliona and I both perform a chain of actions relating to the consumption of narcotics, such as a belt on our arm or rolling with our fingers. We synchronised these actions, and at first, they were quite nebulous and zombified, but as we developed the scene, we decided to refine them, making them more sharply executed. We made use of levels in the prologue. We start the scene at the back of the stage, facing the wall, then turn around and walk slowly towards the audience, gradually getting to our knees, then crawling animalistically, until we are both lying on our backs down stage centre. These different levels are metaphoric of the slow spiral downwards that substance abuse can feel like.

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In taking an episodic approach to the devising process, we wanted to explore 'users' and so researched two polar experiences of drugs from different social backgrounds. We took extracts from interviews of real-life drug victims to use for our characters. Mine was taken a heroin user talking about how they slowly became addicted, but I recontextualised it to be set in Glasgow, inspired by the film *Trainspotting*, which is about a heroin user played by Ewan McGregor. I was inspired by his

performance, using the same agitation, perpetual movements, and dilated pupils. The other character was a doctor, played by Eliona, who became addicted to prescription pills without realising. This is in stark contrast with the other extract, as while the heroin user is about the stereotypical, back-alley junkie, the doctor is someone who you would not normally expect to be labelled as an addict. We thought this idea would demonstrate how the drugs problem is a very wide spectrum, with anyone being able to become addicted.

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In another sequence, we wanted to explore the idea of lesser-known addictions, such as, Benzo Diamorphine's, a form of anti-depressants. We were inspired by the idea of spass (comedy), a Brechtian technique. We used the idea of the 1950's Good Housewife Guide to show a glossy, rose-coloured view of that time period. We experimented with stiff upper lip quality of movement and a clipped Received-Pronunciation English accents. I developed this idea with my role as the husband. I sit in an armchair centre stage and smoke a pipe. My physicality is very stiff and upright, with my legs crossed. The husband character is very distant from his wife, and it is hinted at that he is physically and mentally abusive. His character is very distinct, being based on archetypal characters. We decided we wanted to develop the scene further by experimenting with Helena Wiegel's iconic silent scream. We thought this would end our 1950s housewife scene effectively as it outlines the powerlessness of her domestic social status, and also shows the contradiction that life definitely was not as perfect as we are led to believe. While this silent scream was happening, we experimented with the housewife walking into centre stage, and ripping up her apron, which we thought was symbolic of her wanted to tear up her cut-out roles in the house. We wanted to further layer the sequence, so we discovered the lyrics from the Rolling Stone's 1966 song, *Mother's Little Helper*. I thought these lyrics would fit well with this specific segment as they tell a similar story of a housewife who abuses prescription drugs to tranquilise her mind and "get her through her day". I said these lyrics over the silent scream as an anonymous narrator, which contrasted with my husband role.

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Commented [AC28]: we also considered his notion of epic theatre and historicization so our research drew us to 1950's

Commented [AC29]: no i dont get this- distant and traditional- more feminist approach here- her burning her bra and growing from ashes!

We experimented more with the Brechtian technique spass, as a lot of our piece was very melancholic and serious. We took the concept of border control and satirised it. Our rationale for this scene was to demonstrate (in a somewhat exaggerated way) the laziness of the Government who are supposed to prevent illegal substances entering the country. We were inspired by documentaries, such as Border Control UK and took inspiration from some of the cliches from these shows (female narrator and interview style cut-aways). We first transcribed a string of comedic dialogue, including an RP female narrator, but mainly improvised and devised most of the comedy in the scene. We also commented on how some use this position as an excuse to be discriminatory towards certain races and cultures who are often stereotyped as drug users, e.g., Albanians or Mexicans. In the scene I play Trevor, a border control officer. My physicality as this character was very different from my other roles in the piece. I stand upright with my hands behind my back, rocking subtly back and forth on the balls of my feet, this was inspired by old stereotypical policemen from the 1960's and 1970's, as I thought this would show my authority, but also the archetypal, satirical gestures of the scene and characters. The other character in this scene, a foreign traveller, is wrongfully patted down by my character in a very invasive way, all while repeating that it is just a 'necessary security check'. This is where Brecht's techniques of spass come into play. The situation gets even more ridiculous when another traveller, evidently carrying a bag of Cocaine is allowed to pass through with no questions asked. This scene portrayed the idea of the governments trying to crack down on these drug users are completely missing them entirely.

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Final Ideas for Devised Performance

This leads into one of the last couple of scenes we devised recently. These final scenes reflect the governments who try their best to fight this 'war on drugs', but inevitably fail. The first part of this scene was a parody of the rap *Alexander Hamilton* from the musical of the same name, aimed at Keith Hellawell, a retired police officer and former UK Government Drug Czar. Our rap's lyrics features Hellawell's early life, starting out as a coal miner in Yorkshire, and how he went on to become Britain's youngest Police Sergeant and eventually a Drug Czar for the UK Government. This was an interesting scene for me personally, as I had never heard of Keith Hellawell to begin with, and had never done any rap before, so it was a fun challenge to do. The second part of this scene was inspired by Nancy Reagan's famous 'Just Say No' campaign. In our first part we had shown what Governments were doing to stop drugs, so in this second part we decided to show why their campaigns are not working. We wrote a monologue inspired by Nancy Reagan's speech, but with it being performed by the fictional Mrs. Doubtfire. We chose this character specifically because we were inspired by the final speech at the end of the movie where she answers a little girl's letter about their parents being divorced. We took this as a frame for our scene, with her responding to a letter. We thought that the way she tackles important children's lessons, would be a good outlet for us to satirise and use sardonic humour to critique and expose the absurdity of these failed drug policies. In this scene, I play Mrs. Doubtfire and sit on a stool, while Eliona kneels in front of me holding up a frame, resembling an old TV. To play my role, I adopt a soft Scottish accent (to mimic Robin William's performance in the movie), and I sit upright with excellent posture and my legs crossed. My costume in this scene is a grey curly wig, a dressing gown, and a white headscarf. This made my appearance look comforting, like someone's grandmother.

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Application and Refinement of Skills

To refine the structure of our piece, we made a thread throughout, a television. We applied this through our placards, which were now images of a television set, with the titles being displayed on the screen, and the transitions between them being a 'change of channel'. This utilised a very common Brechtian technique (placards) but updated it in a modern way. Our rationale for this, was when we looked at the content of our piece, a lot of it could be related back to media (e.g., Mrs Doubtfire scene/Nancy Reagan 'Just Say No', Border Control/Airport Documentaries).

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We refined this further by introducing 'commercial breaks' and 'Public Service Announcements' (PSAs), as this helped to break up the action and transition between scenes. The first commercial was an advert for a fictional antidepressant called 'Dexedryll' that comes straight after the housewife's scene. I play one of the announcers. For my role, I had to apply my skills of an American accent and over-exaggerated movements. We took inspiration from a short film called 'Unedited Footage of a Bear' by Alan Resnick, which is about a mother on antidepressants. The second commercial is for a drug called 'Diacetyl Morphine', which comes at the end of the Heroin user scene. This commercial is contrasting because it uses disturbing shocking slogans as opposed to the happier ones in Dexedryll. This is shock-provocation and makes the scene uncomfortable for the audience. At the end of this scene, it is revealed that Diacetyl Morphine is in fact heroin. We took inspiration from the Singapore Anti-Narcotics Association 'Heroin is doing you' PSA.

Our PSA comes before the Heroin user scene and features two children's television show hosts, in the style of popular personalities such as Mr Tumble, one of which is exaggeratingly depressed, played by me. He is offered heroin to make him 'happy again' and that it's fine because 'everybody's doing it', this demonstrates how drugs affect younger children and what impression it gives them. This links back to our dramatic aims, with it being a didactic scene meant to shock the audience.

In my heroin user monologue, I further refined my skills by incorporating rave-like movements, which can also be interpreted as running, symbolising trying to 'run away' from drugs. This pushed my physical skills as I had to practise saying my lines clearly whilst moving quickly. I was inspired by the DV8 film 'The Cost of Living', which, although not directly about drugs, featured a scene in a nightclub where one of the characters moved in a similar way.

Another scene I refined my skills in was the Keith Hellawell Rap. I applied contemporary dance to refine my physicality and make my movements more stylised. This is a Brechtian technique to randomly break out into song and dance. During the chorus, I took on the role of Keith Hellawell himself. To play this exaggerated caricature of him, I wore a red superhero cape, critiquing his position as the 'defender' of the UK from the 'evil drugs'. Physically, I stood up straight, puffing out my chest confidently, making over-the-top hand gestures and flexing my muscles. This achieves my dramatic aim of making the audience laugh through spass as this is a very funny scene.

Commented [AC39]: kabuki approach singing/dancing/acting

Total Word Count – 3,241

(Word count not including sub-headings.)

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