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Lyric Hammersmith and Bristol Old Vic
in association with Kneehigh Theatre

LYRIC
HAMMERSMITH

Nights at the Circus

Based on
the novel
by Angela Carter

A new adaptation by Tom Morris and Emma Rice

Teachers Resource Pack

By Tony Taylor

Kneehigh photography by Steve Tanner



The *Nights at the Circus* Teachers Resource Pack has been produced with the generous help of The Ernest Cook Trust

[A] Introduction for Teachers

The resource materials in this pack are intended to enhance your students' enjoyment and understanding of *Nights at the Circus*, and provide a range of practical follow-up activities for you to explore in the classroom.

The resources are primarily aimed at pupils aged 14+ who are studying courses in Drama at GCSE or A Level, though they can be adapted to suit other purposes.

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[B] Background Information

1. Kneehigh Theatre

'The truly great theatre companies stand out by their ability to be distinctively themselves and yet make a succession of shows that are distinctively different...Kneehigh joins these ranks'

The Guardian, 2004

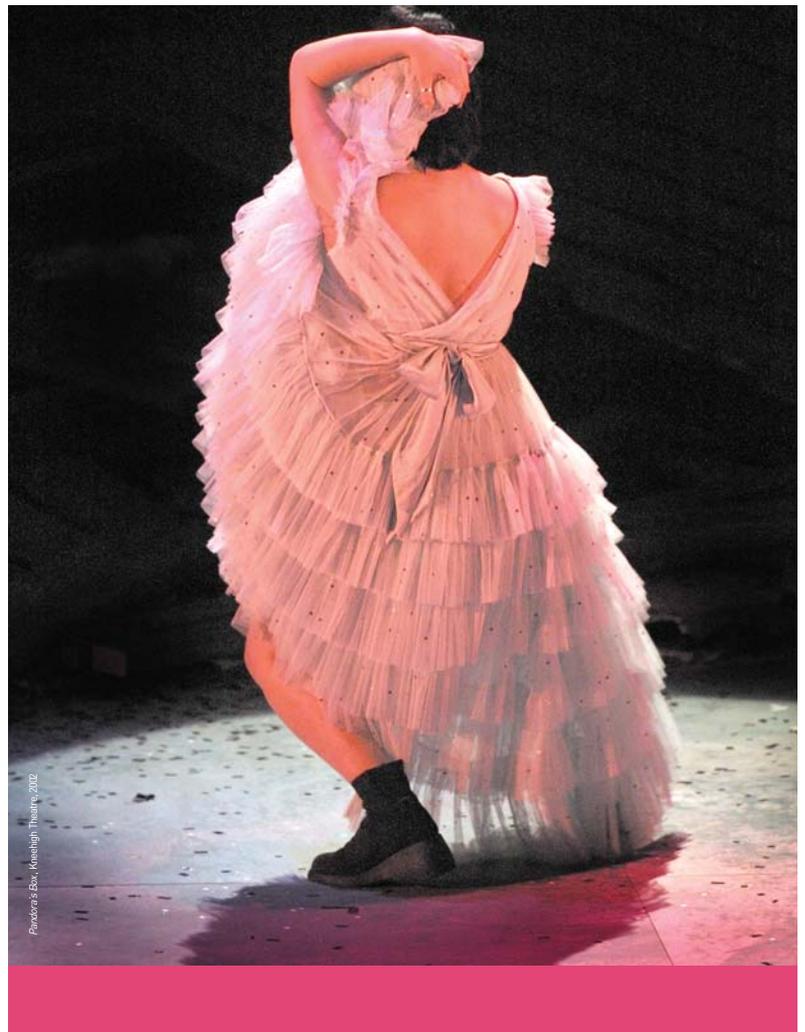
'Kneehigh has become it's own influence. We are by our nature outsiders. We are not particularly influenced by the business. We get together once or twice a year and ask – what are we interested in now? We have a core team of actors who tend to come back again and again. This is probably the reason why the work is so distinctive.'

Emma Rice, Director

Kneehigh was founded in 1980 and is now widely recognised as one of Britain's most exciting and innovative theatre companies. For 25 years the company has created vigorous, popular and challenging theatre for audiences throughout the UK and beyond. Kneehigh have a reputation for creating innovative visual theatre characterised by a joyful anarchy and irreverence.

Emma Rice has recently become Artistic Director of Kneehigh and has directed the company's productions of *Tristan & Yseult*, *The Wooden Frock*, *The Bacchae* and *The Red Shoes*, for which she won Best Director 2002, Barclays TMA Theatre Award. She trained at the Guildhall School of Music and the Gardzienice Theatre Association, Poland.

For more information about Kneehigh Theatre and their past productions visit their website: www.kneehigh.co.uk



2. Angela Carter

‘The amazing thing is that nobody has adapted this text before. It’s one of the seminal books of the twentieth century ... It’s about theatre and showbusiness. It’s also about women in that world. It’s literally about women bursting out of their corsets and flying. I’m not a feminist in the same way that Angela Carter probably was but I celebrate this book.’

Emma Rice, Director

Angela Carter was born in Eastbourne, Sussex in 1940. She started her career as a journalist, working on the Croydon Advertiser. Later, she studied English Literature at the University of Bristol. After graduating she began to write for publications such as *New Society* and *The New Statesman*.

During her lifetime Carter wrote more than half a dozen novels, including *The Magic Toyshop*, *Several Perceptions*, *Nights at the Circus* and *Wise Children*. *Nights at the Circus* was written in 1984 and was Carter’s penultimate novel.

Angela Carter’s 1977 futuristic fantasy *The Passion of New Eve*, and *The Sadeian Woman: And the Ideology of Pornography*, published in 1978, both explore many of the themes found in *Nights At The Circus*.

Angela Carter died of cancer in February 1992 at her home in London, she was 51 years old.

3. Magical Realism

Angela Carter’s work is often categorised as “magical realism”. The term was first coined by a German art critic in the 1920s to describe a trend in post-Expressionist German art. It has since become a common term of literary criticism. Magical realism is used to describe fiction in which magical elements appear in an otherwise realistic setting.

Other Magic Realist fiction includes:

***One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez**

***Like Water for Chocolate* by Laura Esquivel**

***Midnight’s Children* by Salman Rushdie**

***If On a Winter’s Night a Traveller* by Italo Calvino**

***Cloudstreet* by Tim Winton**

***The House of Spirits* by Isabelle Allende**

Of special interest is Garcia Marquez’s 1972 short story entitled *A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings*, which also has a main character equipped with feathered appendages, and similarly explores reactions to this unsettling intrusion of the unreal into the real. This story has also been adapted by Kneehigh Theatre.

4. The Victorian Circus

By the mid nineteenth century there were hundreds of circuses operating in Britain. There was even an aquatic circus where the circus ring was flooded with water. Many nineteenth century theatres presented circus acts and aerial acts, and jugglers were often featured in music hall. Trapeze and high wire artists were particularly popular, often performing above the crowds sat in the theatre stalls.

Every circus had a clown act. Traditionally there were two types of clown in the circus, the white faced clown and the Auguste. The White Face clowns are descendants of the Pierrot clowns of Commedia dell'arte. They wore white make-up and their facial expressions were drawn with red or black greasepaint. Augustes were foils for the White-Face clowns. They wore untidy, baggy clothes and big boots.



By the mid-19th century the larger touring circuses began to exhibit side shows. These would sometimes include what were then called 'human oddities', Siamese twins, giants, bearded ladies, dwarfs (then known as Midgets), people without arms or legs, and people who could perform unusual acts such as snake charming. In America people were 'displayed' as exhibits in Museums. The most famous of these was Barnum's Hall of Living Curiosities in New York.

There was an international trade in wild animals tamed for circuses, including lions, tigers, leopards, bears, elephants and monkeys. A flamboyant American called Isaac Van Amburgh was a famous lion tamer and was the first man to put his head inside a lion's mouth.

One of the factors that made circus so popular was that fairground entertainers travelled to their audiences. The development of the railways in the nineteenth century enabled circuses to travel further. By the 1870s huge circuses were touring across Europe and America.

You can discover more about Victorian circus by visiting PeoplePlay UK:

www.peopleplayuk.org.uk/guided_tours/circus_tour/the_victorian_circus/default.php

[C] Interview With The Director

At the beginning of rehearsals for *Nights at the Circus* we met with the Artistic Director of Kneehigh, Emma Rice, to ask her about her approach to directing.

Q. Do you have a set methodology or approach to making theatre?

There is no formula to the way we make theatre. However, it always starts with the story. No, it starts before then. It starts with an itch, a need, an instinct. I think it's important that all the actors find a personal connection to the story. What does this story say to you about your experience? What is your relationship to the text? It can be a small thing or a big thing. It might be as simple as I dream about flying. That's something that everyone can relate to.

Q. So, what is your connection to *Nights at the Circus*?

I'm very moved by and empathise with all the issues of identity in the novel. Carter is exploring what it means to put on the make-up, what it is to live in front of an audience. I feel it's very much a book about women getting older, and certainly women in the theatre getting older. It's about the layers that we cover ourselves in to protect ourselves. It's a novel about theatre and showbusiness and women in that world. It's literally about women bursting out of their corsets and flying. I'm not a feminist in the same way that Angela Carter probably was but I celebrate this book.

Q. Who are your major influences?

Kneehigh has become its own influence. We are by our nature outsiders. We are not particularly influenced by the business. We get together once or twice a year and ask – what are we interested in now? We have a core team of actors who tend to come back again and again. This is probably the reason why the work is so distinctive. However, like all theatre directors of my generation I have been greatly influenced by the work of Complicite.

Q. How did you approach adapting the novel?

The amazing thing is that nobody has adapted this text before as it's one of the seminal books of the twentieth century. The challenge of this piece has been working with a massive text. I did a lot of work before rehearsals began stripping the novel back to a manageable story. Things that work in a novel just don't work on stage. They are two different mediums. The experience that one has being absorbed in a book for nine hours is very different from a good night out at the theatre. I know that some people are going to complain that I've missed out their favourite bit!

Q. How do rehearsals begin?

The first thing I do in rehearsals is get everyone thinking about the production as a whole. The shared imagination is greater than any individuals. I get the actors to tell the story to each other. I usually work on great big pieces of paper, which get stuck up around the rehearsal room. We often refer back to these notes later. Often I find the actors have some of their best ideas on the first day. It's important that these early ideas are not forgotten; they become useful reference points later on, especially if we reach a creative block.

Q. Can you describe any particular methods you use when directing your actors?

I very rarely ask people to improvise vocally in the early parts of rehearsal – that's being clever with words and can come later. I prefer to work on a more emotional level. What does it feel like for Walser to walk into Fever's dressing room? I might put on music and lights but it's very simple. I'm trying to stop the actors from feeling that they immediately have to be brilliant or clever. I try to give the actors a clear starting point. So I might work out three words that are associated with their character, or sometimes it's a phrase. You might have someone who internally is thinking 'I am very beautiful' or 'I'm hungry.' I also give them a clue about their physicality. When they go into a scene they will have three character words, a part of the body that leads, and a secret thought. It means that you are not going into the space starting from nothing. It's vital that the actors have active words to play. You can't play being alone – you just are alone. However, you can play being violent for example. I also get all the actors to work on the same character. So everybody gets to the chance to play Fevers for the day. I try to create an environment in which the actors are not precious about their work.

Q. Why is play so important to your work?

I have a profound belief as a director that our primary emotion as human beings is fear. We are all basically fearful of making a mistake or looking like an idiot or being found out. In theatre fear is an entirely useless emotion. As a director I try and remove fear from every aspect of the creative process so that nobody is exposed or has a sense of failure.

Q. How do you see your role as director?

As a director I keep a strong eye on the direction of the piece, the actors don't need to worry about that. They are totally free; they don't have to be responsible for the structure. I give them very clear situations to play and they then offer me the most amazing, rich palette of ideas that I could never think of alone. Their play is balanced by my responsibility as a director. I am guiding their play.

[D] Activities Before Seeing The Show

1. Play

‘There is a great spirit of naughtiness or anarchy in the work and that spirit comes from the moment that we meet and is recreated by the actors onstage every night.’

Emma Rice, Director

A positive sense of play is integral to Kneehigh’s rehearsal process. The company believe that being ready to play, being spontaneous and prepared to take risks are key to being an open and creative performer. The following exercises are designed to encourage students to develop a sense of play and ‘find the game’ in simple scenarios. They will prepare your students for the conventions and style of the performance they are about to see.

1.1 Keepy Uppy

- All you need for this game is a soft ball. Start by getting the group into a circle. Throw the ball into the air and begin to count. It is up to each member of the group to ensure that the ball stays in the air using their hands to tap it gently upwards. You cannot touch the ball twice in succession. The counting stops if the ball is dropped. The aim is to get the count as high as possible. Once the group has mastered this develop the game so that every fifth touch of the ball must be with a part of the body different than the hand.

1.2 Sock Tails

- Start by getting everyone in the group to tuck a sock into the back of their waistband as a tail. Walk around the space. The aim of the game is to gather as many of your opponent’s socks as possible. If you lose your sock then join the audience watching the game.
- Take risks by showing other players your tail. Find the play in teasing the group.
- Develop the exercise by trying to improvise a scene whilst playing the game. You must try to sustain the scene and the game.

1.3 Cat and mouse

- Stand in groups of three, one behind the other.
- One player is chosen to be the cat, another the mouse. The cat’s objective is to tag the mouse.
- At any point the mouse can join onto the back of any group of three. This releases the person at the front of the line who becomes the mouse.
- Repeat the game but this time the player released becomes the cat and the roles are reversed.

‘We are completely dedicated to the freedom that this sense of naughtiness or anarchy gives. As a director I keep a strong eye on the direction of the piece, the deep. The actors don’t need to worry about that. They are totally free, they don’t have to be responsible for the structure. I give them very clear situations to play and they then offer me the most amazing, rich palette of ideas that I could never think of alone.’

Emma Rice, Director

1.4 Grandmother's Footsteps

- One volunteer is selected to be 'Grandmother' and is at one end of the room and everyone else is at the other. The aim is to get to 'Grandmother' and tag her without being seen moving. Grandmother faces the wall briefly and everyone slowly makes their way towards her. When grandmother turns around anyone who is seen moving is sent back to the start.
- A development of the traditional game is to add a jumper or jacket, deposited a few meters behind 'Grandmother'. The object of the game is not merely to reach Grandmother, but to put on the jumper before you get to her.
- Now try playing the game without the Grandmother being present. The players must try to recreate the spirit of the game as accurately as possible.
- How difficult is it to recreate the game? Is the playful spirit of the game lost? How does this exercise relate to the nature of performance?

1.5 Greetings Game

- Ask the group to stand in their own space in the room. On a given signal start to walk around the room, exploring all the available space. Keep changing direction. Walk at your normal pace.
- Ask the group to make eye contact as they pass each other. Exchange a smile. Look for the mischievous twinkle in people's eyes.
- Now ask the group to 'find the game' of greeting each other. They should attempt to do this without discussion – just explore what emerges. The group may eventually decide to greet each other with a nod of the head, a wave, or perhaps something more unusual and inventive.

1.6 Compliments Game

- Work in pairs. A shows their partner a simple movement. B must compliment their partner "That's very good. Is there more?" The answer is always "Yes". Continue to develop the exercise and then swap over.



Amranda Lawrence in rehearsal for Train & Youth, Kneehigh Theatre, 2005

'Two of my actors were sat on the edge of the stage the other day and they noticed a crack in the floor. They improvised a whole scene based around exploring this crack. That could almost be an audition for Kneehigh. I'm looking for the sort of actors who are curious about the world around them, who have an instinct to play.'

Emma Rice, Director

1.7 Props Game

- Work in pairs. Give each pair an object or prop to play with. You need to have a large collection. The more odd the objects, the more surreal the play is likely to be. Items such as cardboard tubes, suitcases, feather dusters or umbrellas are all useful.
- Encourage them to investigate their object thoroughly. What does it do? Does it open? Can they get into it? Can they wear it? What's the game?
- Try to develop the play into a short scene without words.

2. Clown

‘The main thing I look for in actors is a spirit of naughtiness. There is an outsider quality to the people I like to work with. I look for funny people, natural clowns – people who take a sideways look at the world. I’m interested in people who are looking out through their eyes not inwards.’

Emma Rice, Director

2.1 Centres Of Leading

- Ask the group to walk around the space in a neutral way. Call out a body part, which is going to be their character’s physical centre. Start with the nose. The students should move around the space as though their nose is leading them. How does this way of moving affect the rest of the body or the rhythm of their walk?
- Repeat the exercise using a different part of the face e.g. the forehead or chin.
- Experiment with leading from other parts of the body – the chest, stomach, knees or hands.
- Ask the group to find a voice to match. Note how the voice and rhythm of the walk change with different centres of leading.
- Split the group so that half are performing and half are watching.
- Try putting two of these characters together in a simple scenario e.g. in an office or a doctor’s waiting room.

2.2 Finding The Quality Of The Clown

- Ask a small group of students to line up on stage facing the audience. Stand in neutral.
- Instruct the students to look above the heads of the audience. Imagine that you are looking at the top of the Eiffel Tower. You are seeing it for the first time in your life – you are full of wonder and amazement. Smile.
- Now ask the students to lower their gaze to make eye contact with the audience. Keep the quality of childlike wonder that you have found.
- Tell the students to run around the space. Stop! Look at the audience.
- You might want to try this exercise using red clown noses. What effect does this have?

‘I get the actors who aren’t playing that character to dress up the actor who is. Very liberating. You need to find things that are enabling rather than blocking. This takes the actor outside their comfort zone. You can put them in a coat that they wouldn’t choose themselves. As long as you are in a supportive environment then this can be a really liberating experience.’

Emma Rice, Director

2.3 A Chorus Of Clowns

- For this exercise you will need to assemble a large selection of costumes; coats, hats and scarves are particularly useful.
- Select four or five students to perform. Now ask other students in the group to dress each of the performers. Be selective. The idea is to make the actors look ridiculous. However, make sure that you make useful choices that don't restrict the performer's movement.
- Ask the students to make an entrance from offstage as a chorus. They should find the moment to launch their entrance as a group without any one person leading – an unspoken agreement.
- Once onstage encourage the students to do nothing, to stop acting – less is more. Get them to look at each other and then the audience.
- Now ask the performers to 'find the game' of warming-up for the audience. The rule is: if the audience laugh – do it again!
- It's useful for the teacher to provoke the performers if ideas begin to dry up: "That's very good. Is there more?"
- To finish ask the chorus to find the moment to play their exit without any one person leading the group.
- A development of this exercise is to instruct the chorus of clowns that they are taking part in a singing competition, e.g. The X Factor or the Eurovision Song Contest. Once the group have made their entrance they all have to spontaneously burst into song at the same time on a given signal. The group must not discuss or decide what the song will be beforehand.

2.4 Research task

Find out about the following theatre practitioners: Jacques Lecoq, Phillippe Gaulier, Simon McBurney. Can you find parallels with Kneehigh's approach to making theatre?

3. Adapting Fiction

'Things that work in a novel do not work on stage. They are two different mediums. The experience that one has being absorbed in a book for nine hours is very different from a good night out at the theatre.'

Emma Rice, Director

Curriculum Link:

Devising from a stimulus is a common element of most Drama specifications. The activities in this section could be useful starting points for Unit 4 (Devising) of the Edexcel AS Drama and Theatre Studies course; Unit A1 (Devising) of the Edexcel BTEC Nationals in Performing Arts; Paper 2, Option A (Devised Performance) of the Edexcel GCSE Drama course; Option 1 (Devised Thematic) of the AQA GCSE Drama course.

3.1 Chorus

- Look at the first scene in the novel in which Walser is interviewing Fevvers in her dressing room. During the scene Fevvers and Lizzie are getting Walser drunk.
- Work as a chorus to externalise Walser's feeling of intoxication so that actor isn't playing drunk – the cast change his perception.
- Compare the way this section is staged in the production.

3.2 Flying (Non-Naturalism)

- Ask the students to find ways in groups of creating the convention whereby Fevvers flying is believable without being naturalistic.
- Repeat the exercise using familiar domestic materials – eg newspapers – that requires the audience to imagine what is not there.
- Compare the way flying is staged in the production.

‘I try to give the actors a clear starting point. So I might work out three words that are associated with their character, or sometimes it’s a phrase. You might have someone who internally is thinking ‘I am very beautiful’ or ‘I’m hungry.’ I give them a clue with their physicality. When they go into a scene they will have three character words, a part of the body that leads, and a secret thought. It means that you are not going into the space starting from nothing.

Emma Rice, Director

3.3 Characterisation

- Each student undertakes to study one of three characters in the novel: Fevers, Walser and Lizzie.
- As a group, brainstorm internal phrases for each of the characters.
- Ask the students to improvise each character as a physical or dance chorus, without speaking, responding to the internal phrase. Set a clear start and finish time – eg 3-5 minutes.
- Share and appraise each group’s physical qualities, applying a physical theatre or dance vocabulary – eg direct or indirect, heavy or light, slow or fast rhythm.
- Ask the students to choose an appropriate piece of music for each character and improvise each character in groups as a physical theatre or dance piece, without speaking.
- Compare the way the performers in the production played the characters.

3.4 Compressing The Narrative

- Look at the novel of *Nights at the Circus* and establish the key turning points in the story.
- Distill the story into 5-10 sentences.
- In small groups adapt this into a single devised scene which should last no longer than 5 minutes.
- This can be a written or practical drama exercise or both.
- Compare the way the narrative is compressed in the production.

3.5 Adapting Other Texts

- Choose a story that your group is interested in adapting into a piece of theatre. Fairystories can be very useful as most of the group are likely to be familiar with the more popular examples, such as *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Beauty And The Beast* and *Goldilocks And The Three Bears*.
- Chose someone in the group to retell the story in their own words to the rest of the group. Repeat the exercise, this time using the rest of the group to create or represent the characters.
- Try to condense the story that you are adapting to one side of A4 paper. Divide the story into separate episodes and identify the key moments that move the story on.
- Try to tell the story in a series of still images that depict the key interesting moments.
- Experiment with different styles of narration. Start with a narrator who is outside of the story. This could be a neutral storyteller who is unconnected to the characters or it could be a character that is related to the story. Now chose a character inside the story to narrate. They can tell their story in the present tense or they can recounting events that have happened in the past. Finally, explore using multiple narration where all the actors share responsibility for telling the story. Each of these choices will change the way you stage the story and the relationship between the actors and the audience. Which is most appropriate to the story you want to tell?
- Revisit the work on Clown (Section 2). How can you use a chorus of clowns to support the telling of your narrative?

[E] Reflecting And Reviewing

This section is intended to help you reflect on your visit to the theatre. There is no set format to organising your thoughts and opinions and the following prompts are only a guide to structuring your notes. Remember: your personal response is the most important aspect of any review.

Curriculum Link:

Reviewing live performance is an important element of all Drama and Theatre Studies specifications at Key Stage 4 and post-16. Most exam boards allow students to take notes into their written examination, though they are quite strict about the degree of teacher intervention and support that can be given when compiling these notes.

The purpose of this section is to provide some approaches to reflecting on the performance which will inform the students note taking.

1. Style



'I don't want 'the fourth wall' constantly and fearfully placed between the actors and the audience. I want the actors to speak to their accomplices, to look at them, to respond to them.' Emma Rice, Director

- In what ways did the actors make contact with the audience? What effect did this have?
- Why do you think the director has chosen to work in this style?
- How did the practical activities you undertook before seeing the performance (see Section D) relate to what you saw on stage?
- Can you identify the influence of any theatre practitioners you have studied?

2. Creating Tableaux Of Key Moments

- In small groups think of 3 or 4 key moments in the play that you found particularly memorable, or thought were significant.
- Find a way to show these moments in a series of frozen pictures or tableaux. Pay particular attention to use of space, facial expression and body language.
- Share your work with the rest of the group. Identify the moments that have been chosen and attempt to put them in sequence.
- Discuss the images that have been created. Has each group chosen the same key moments? What do these images tell us about the play?
- If you have studied the book you may wish to consider the strongest images that stood out for you after reading the novel. How were these moments realised in performance?

3. Qualities

Look at this list of words that have been used to describe Kneehigh's work. How do these words relate to the production you have seen? What other words would you add to this list?

Generosity
Energy
Passion
Flexibility
Trust
Bravery
Humility
Respect
Skill
Ambition
Humour
Instinct
Humanity
Naughtiness
Irreverence

4. Shared recall

Work in pairs or small groups. For this exercise you will need large sheets of sugar paper and pens. Allocate each group a different area of focus, for example: acting, set design, lighting and sound, costume, directorial interpretation. Work together to brainstorm your area of focus and record your ideas. After two minutes pass your sheet onto another group. They then have two minutes to read your notes and add their own ideas. Repeat this process until everyone has contributed something to each sheet. Photocopy each of the sheets so everyone has a copy to take away with them.

5. Structuring your notes

- **General overview**

Summarise the plot in a few of sentences. Describe in detail the style of the play. Did it remind you of any other plays that you have seen or know? What was your general response to the production? Did you find it an enjoyable experience? Why? Did it give you food for thought? About what and why? What did you learn about modern theatre practices? What theatrical devices and conventions were used?

- **Direction**

The director is the person who, in the end, is responsible for what you see on stage. What do you think the director was trying to convey? What meanings in this play were emphasised? How did the design, staging, and acting style draw attention to these? Were these choices successful in creating the impact on the audience you thought the director and creative team intended?

Did the theatre itself and the playing area suit the production? Why or why not? Were the stage pictures interesting as well as meaningful? Was there an interesting and varied use of stage space? What did you think about the pace of the production?

- **Acting**

Discuss the acting style. How would you describe it? What can you say about the kind of acting in this production compared with the kind of work you've seen in other productions and done yourself? Was the style of acting appropriate to the kind of play and style of production? Why or why not? Who gave the most notable performance? Try to be specific in saying why. What were the key moments from the production that stand out in your memory?

- **Design Elements**

How did the design contribute to the production's meanings? Describe the sets, lights and costumes. What kind of a statement did each of these make? Include sketches where they are helpful.



Stu Baker, The Wooden Frog, Keele High Theatre, 2004/2005