

Kantor – Theatre of Death

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GCSE

Can-do Kantor

This scheme introduces the work of Polish dramaturge, Tadeusz Kantor. Activities are based on Kantor's 'The Theatre of Death – a Manifesto', where he builds on Edward Gordon Craig's notion of the 'superpuppet' or Ubermarionette.

Born in Austro-Hungary in 1915, Kantor graduated from Krakow Academy at the outbreak of World War 2. During the Nazi occupation he founded the Independent Theatre, was professor at the Krakow Academy of Fine Arts, and, from 1942–44, directed experimental theatre in Krakow. Kantor's pedigree of art, design and direction meant he could speak out through visual means when censorship prevented explicit social commentary. His production of *The Dead Class* has been described as the 'definitive, visionary production [...] combining allegory, symbolism, plastic art and politics, about a 'class' of old people who carry the children they once were, now dead, literally strapped to their backs.' (Drozdowski, Bohdon, *Twentieth Century Polish Theatre*, John Calder Ltd, p.11).

Encouraging students to become less literal, to incorporate masks, make-up and puppetry in their work, and giving them a taste of the dramatist as social commentator, the module can be differentiated both up and down. There is intellectual scope here to cater for the synoptic challenges of A-level specifications. In addition, the themes and range of practical skills addressed will sustain the varied interests and abilities encountered at KS4.

Lessons last about an hour and the module takes 20 lessons, including rehearsal for performance. Teaching spaces should be adaptable for whole-class teaching, circle time, group rehearsal areas and a performance area. A set of Trestle-style masks would be ideal. Plain white masks will do if your budget is tight. Access to a laptop and interactive board are needed in order to show extracts online, alongside a digital camera from which you can quickly upload and watch students' work. Cross-curricular links include those to history (World War 2) and art; prior learning about masks and make-up would also be useful. Rich opportunities abound for some students to be assessed on a design element instead of performance.

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Tadeusz Kantor

Lesson 1: Introduction

Objectives and outcomes

- To understand the idea of conscious and unconscious performance and begin to explore the effect of both.

All will show some understanding of unconscious and conscious performance through whole class discussion and in performance. Most will also begin to comment on the effect on the audience and on the performer. Some will develop and build on others' ideas, synthesizing and reflecting critically on them.

Keywords

- Craig
- Kleist
- Kantor
- Consciousness
- Self-awareness
- Marionette
- Puppet.

Before students enter, create a 'fourth wall' line dividing your teaching space (e.g. with masking tape). Set up a camera as unobtrusively as possible on one side of the line, to film the students as they enter and sit in 'audience rows' on the other side. Place a school photo of each student on each chair. If photos are not available, place a mask or other stimulus prop of your choice with their name on the chairs.

ice-breaker (10 minutes)

As students enter, direct them to find their seat. Try not to say too much yourself – you want them to behave as naturally as possible. The camera will capture their behaviour. Follow your normal classroom routine of registering if you need to – all the while the camera rolling. You only need two minutes or so of footage.

Stop the camera. Explain to the students that you were filming them. They may be surprised! Upload the footage and watch it straightaway with the class. Ask them to look out for any recognisable ‘mannerisms’ in each other, such as someone playing with her hair or the way someone sits. Share. Key questions are: who found it comfortable to watch themselves? If you had to re-enter and do exactly the same thing, playing the part of yourself, how easy would you find it? Why?

They will probably have laughed or cringed at their photos, and may have put the masks on, or shared their props with each other. An atmosphere of warmth and trust is vital here, for sharing photos and footage of each other. Ensure you challenge any inappropriate comments that might undermine this.

starter (10 minutes)

If you used photos, ask students now to recreate their facial expression and body language from their school photo. They should create a freeze frame in groups of three. If you used props or masks, ask students to try to recreate the moment when they came into the room, sat down and reacted to the items on their chairs.

See some of these. How easy did students find it to play themselves? How many like their school photo? Why?

main (10–12 minutes)

Do a ‘whoosh’ of the adapted extract from Heinrich von Kleist’s *On the Marionette Theatre* (Kleist, 1810).

Link up the learning, by explaining the idea that actors are imperfect performers. Kantor, Craig and Kleist all explore this. As soon as actors become ‘conscious’ of their actions, which presumably they have to do in rehearsals, they lose part of their natural performance. Elicit student reactions. Do they agree with this? What are the implications for actors?

Explain that we are going to be exploring ways this module to bring this element of ‘unconsciousness’ with us back onto the stage.

See the script at the end of the scheme for the whoosh. You will need the following props: a comb, a mirror, some blusher, and a picture of Leonardo DiCaprio (or other handsome star!)

A whoosh is a great tool whatever the age or ability of students. However, for more able or older students you could provide a copy of the original Kleist (in translation) to read for homework. At the time of writing, it’s available online here: <http://southerncrossreview.org/9/kleist.htm>

development (15 minutes)

Now, students devise a short dance scene in fours: two are to be ‘puppets’ and two, puppet masters. The puppet masters control the movements of the others, as if their limbs were on strings. Model this to the class with a confident student first. Give them a piece of music to listen to and rehearse to. *Singing in the Rain* works well here. Their puppet dance should be inspired by the music. If students are familiar with working with masks, you could suggest their use.

The key to the exercise is that both puppet and master must devise and choreograph the dance *together*, and work out how to make it *look* like the puppet master is in control.

Plenary

See examples and peer review according to the learning objectives and success criteria.

Lesson 2: Puppets**Objectives and outcomes**

- To understand how puppets can model the ‘unconscious’ or ‘death of the actor’ on stage
- To make a mannequin for use in performance.

All will watch examples of puppet performance and show some understanding of its effect through whole-class discussion. All will make performance mannequins. Some will develop and build on others’ contributions and make links to external ideas, synthesizing and reflecting critically on them.

NB: for lesson 2, it would be helpful to have an extra adult in the room.

Keywords

- Performing space
- Stage
- Audience
- Fourth wall
- Mannequin.

ice-breaker (5 minutes)

While you register and settle the class as needed, show students 'Laughing Sailor' footage. This is a good link – <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HHsS4zdLJO4>
Who found it funny? Who found it scary? Who found it both?!

starter (5–10 minutes)

Again, set up a clear, visible dividing line between performance space and audience rows. Have three chairs on the 'performing' side of the line. Ask students to take it in turns to leave the audience and sit in the performance space. They should simply sit and look at the audience. After 10 seconds they should return to the other side.

Recap last lesson's learning about conscious and unconscious performance by asking the students: what's the difference between the person sitting on the performing side of the line and the person in the audience? When do you become a performer? What happens when you cross the dividing line or fourth wall?

Place a doll or puppet on the chair. Explain that, unlike Kleist and Craig, Kantor did not want to replace the live actor with a 'superpuppet' but instead to use both actors and puppets on stage together. At this point, ask a student to sit with the doll on his or her knee. Explain that the puppet is like a model for the actor. It is a way of representing the differences/similarities between life (actor) and art (doll). Similar to a human being but empty of life, the puppet highlights what life is, by showing what life is not. In the same way that the actor is separated from the audience by an invisible barrier, so the marionette is separated, or 'once removed', from the actor. Kantor wanted to use the puppets to bring out all these ideas on stage.

An old-fashioned doll or puppet would work best.

development (5 minutes)

Show the following extract from *The Dead Class*: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ddGwgWUTp0s>. Explain that this type of theatre is quite dark, using black humour, capturing life and death on stage.

main (35 minutes)

For this module, we need some mannequins that represent us and that we can use on stage with us. Students should work quite quickly in this next section. It is best if you have a ready-made example to talk them through what to do, step by step.

For this activity, you will need some thick skin-coloured tights, lightweight skin-coloured tights, needles, strong thread, string, strong malleable wire, and – eventually – distinctive pairs of hats, the style of which will need to match the themes of devised performances. Students are going to make mini-mes! They will need four pairs of thick tights each. By stuffing the thick tights quite full with the lightweight tights they can make arms and legs. The waistbands of both pairs will then be stitched together making a torso. String should be tied around one pair of tights halfway down and four-fifths of the way down, effectively creating elbow and wrist joints in the arms. In the other pair, only tie the string four-fifths of the way along, for the ankle. Knees are not needed!

For the head, students need only one leg to stuff very fully into a rounded shape. This will need to be stitched to the body too. You can stiffen the mannequins' limbs and bodies, and allow them to hold their heads up, using the wire 'threaded' through as needed. Ensure students are supervised when cutting and using the wire, and that wire ends are covered with plastic stoppers or are bent round to present no risk. For the faces, plain white masks can be used (or Trestle style masks), attached with elastic around the head. The hats will be used to associate the mannequin with each performer.

If particular students are interested in being assessed for technical skills, you could invest some time in teaching and making papier-mâché face masks. It takes over an hour for the casts to dry. You could speed the process up a little with hair dryers but take care not to burn skin! The advantage is that students' masks will match their own faces, and they will have more of a sense of ownership over them. Ensure you use a water-based, child-friendly glue such as PVA. It is worthwhile getting parental consent, or putting an item in a school newsletter prior to the lesson.

Important!

Allow time to pack everything away safely, with puppets clearly identified.

Lesson 3: Mirroring, shadowing, and research

Objectives and outcomes

- To develop mirroring and shadowing skills; to appreciate themes in Kantor's work and generate linked ideas for own dramas.

All will practice skills of mirroring and shadowing. All will show some understanding of themes through group discussion, and mind-mapping. Most will also invent linked plotlines of their own. Some will develop and build on others' ideas, synthesizing and reflecting critically on them.

Keywords

- Mirroring
- Shadowing
- Research
- Themes
- Distance
- Memory
- Loss
- Life
- Death.

ice-breaker (5 minutes)

Play 'look down, look up, move over'.

Students form a big circle, standing with their arms held comfortably at their sides. On your command, they look down, pause, and then look up. They will try to make eye contact with someone in the circle, looking across, diagonally, or to either side. If they don't make eye contact they stay where they are, but if they do make eye contact, they celebrate and move to a second circle. The whole process starts over with your command. This time, both circles will act on command. If they make eye contact in the second circle, they go back to the main circle again.

mirror to shadow (10 minutes)

Students in the inner circle now turn and face those in the outer circle to find a pair. Practise some mirroring work to enhance skills of focus and concentration. Start by normal mirroring, with A mirroring B, allowing students to watch each other's movements. Increase the challenge by only allowing students to look in each other's eyes. Eventually move to mirroring each other from across the room, and then walking around the room.

Main-group research (25–30 minutes)

Remind students that in this module they will be devising a piece of drama to explore some of the concepts of Kantor's Theatre of Death. We watched a scene from this last lesson. Some of Kantor's key themes are distance, separation, life and death, memory and loss.

This lesson students are going to develop a portfolio of stimulus ideas to draw on for their storyline. Starting in home groups of four, they are going to break out into expert groups to research different stimulus materials. At the end of their research they are going to feedback to the home group, to enable to home group to complete a research grid. The best research grid will win a prize for that group!

Expert groups each research one of the following. I've suggested the pitch of each stimulus in case you wish to set the expert groups according to ability:

- Coraline (lower ability)
- The Listeners (middle ability)
- Narcissus (higher ability)
- Kantor's life and times (higher ability).

Research material should include images, facts and reading to discuss. Each expert needs pen and paper for notes, so that they can feed back meaningfully to their home groups at the end.

To structure the 'expert research', start with a recall task, where delegates from the expert groups 'run' to an image in bursts of ten seconds, memorise part of it, run back to their group and try to reconstruct what they have seen. For example: the delegate from the Coraline group runs to a table where there is an image of Coraline (e.g. <http://www.yourmoviestuff.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/07/coraline.jpg>) and tries to memorise it to recreate back with the group. Similarly, the Listeners group have an image of a forest at night (e.g. <http://abstract.desktopnexus.com/wallpaper/47206/>) to recreate; the Narcissus group are trying to reconstruct an image of Narcissus (http://www.zakros.com/projects/narcissus/narcissus_cara.html); and the Kantor group have a map of Nazi-occupied Europe (e.g. http://www.newcastle.gov.uk/core.nsf/a/hmd_info116).

Stop after about three minutes and give students the image.

continued overleaf



Main-group research (cont'd)

Now move onto expert group reading for about 10 minutes. The Coraline group read a summary of the film. You can find one here: <http://www.starpulse.com/Movies/Coraline/Summary/>. If you have access to a computer, the group could even watch the trailer for the film: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LO3n67BQvh0>. The Narcissus group read the myth (<http://www.narcissismfree.com/the-narcissus-myth.php>). The Listeners read the poem <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poem.html?id=177007>, and the Kantor group read a brief biography of Kantor (you will probably want to edit the information here: <http://www.changeperformingarts.it/kantor/kantor.html>) and information on the Nazi occupation of Poland, (for example from sources here: <http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/poland.htm>).

Before returning to their home groups, the experts spend around 10 minutes generating ideas for pieces of drama based on their stimulus. The experts should make notes.

Finally all the home groups, containing one of each of the 'experts', reunite. They feed back their information to their home group, fill in their research grid, and again share ideas for storylines. Reward the group that has worked the best.

Focus group work using prompt questions for groups to answer, or leave it more open, depending on the nature of your students.

Plenary: 10–15 minutes

Still in home groups, students pick their best idea and create three freeze frames to represent it. Each group shows their work. Perform thought tracking to allow students to verbalise what's happening in their freeze frame and how it brings out the key themes of loss, memory, distance, life and death.

Lessons 4–12

In these lessons, exercises to enhance skills related to Kantor's theatre, especially working with puppets, should take place (see below), and students should be given opportunities in their performance groups to generate ideas and rehearse.

Working with Kantorian puppets

Kantor is very clear that the mannequin should 'pass a strong sense of death' and represent 'the conditions of the DEAD' (Drozdowski, p.102). Therefore, students need to resist the temptation to bring their puppet to life through manipulating it. It is an extension of them, either attached to, or carried by, them. It represents some inner part of their character which has 'died' – a memory, a lost dream, a forgotten or buried act.

Exercises that will promote this approach could include:

- ▷ Recapping stage positioning and upstaging. Students will need to experiment with the mannequin attached in different ways to avoid being upstaged by, or upstaging, their puppet.
- ▷ Focus and concentration games. Students need to keep not only a straight face, but a deadpan face, during the dark humour created through the puppets. Remember, the mannequin is the model performer! For this, try games such as 'I love you but I just can't laugh'; counting as high as possible between the group without agreeing in advance who will say which number; dancing with the mannequins attached to different types of music.
- ▷ Rehearsing while wearing a mask that matches or contrasts with that of the mannequin.
- ▷ Rehearsing well-known scenes with a mannequin attached or cradled in their arms. Scenes that might work well are: Lady Macbeth's nightmare (*Macbeth*, Act 5, Scene 1); the opening of Martin Crimp's version of Ionesco's *The Chairs*; the opening of *The Crucible*, Act 2; Rizzo's 'There are Worse Things I Could Do' from *Grease*.

Lessons 12–20**Rehearsal**

By now, idea generation should be finalised. Students should be well and truly into rehearsal and polishing. You may want to set some homework tasks, relating to examination or coursework, so that students can practise writing about the ideas, themes and practical development of their work.

Resources

Lesson 1: Whoosh script

You will need a confident and well-liked student to play student A.

'About three years ago, I taught a student who was then remarkably graceful.' (Select student A).

He was about fifteen, and you could only just about see in him the first traces of vanity, because he was quite good-looking –' (Give student A a sign of his charm such as a comb to do his hair) – 'and was starting to get attention from the ladies.' (Pick two more students, B and C, to fawn over him!).

'Around about that time, we were studying images from Romeo and Juliet and we watched the film. Now, the main actor ...' (Select another, student D, and give them a picture of Leonardo DiCaprio to represent him.) '... is very well-known, as he's in lots of Hollywood films.' (Picture suggestion – <http://teacher.weblog.com.pt/arquivo/image001.jpg>)

'One day our friend here came into the classroom, sat down and combed his hair.' (Give student A a chair). 'Just as he did, his facial expression looked exactly like Leonardo DiCaprio. (Give girls a prompt slip to say their lines – student B – 'Ooh, he looks exactly like Leonardo DiCaprio in that picture of him.' Student C – 'No he doesn't.')

'He blushed.' (Wait to see if student A blushes.) Say again, 'He blushed'. (Get out some blusher powder and apply to his cheeks!)

'He tries to do the same facial expression again to show the girls (Wait for student A to try again) 'but the effort was a failure, as anybody could have foreseen. He tried it again a third time, a fourth time, he must have tried ten times, but it was in vain. He was quite unable to reproduce the same look. What am I saying? The movements he made were so comical that I was hard put not to laugh.' (Give students B and C prompt slip for their line – 'Ah hahahaha!'. Get the other students to join in.)

'From that day, from that very moment, an extraordinary change came over this boy.' (Give him a mirror.) 'He began to spend whole days before the mirror. Those attracted to him slipped away –' (students B and C sit down) '– one after the other. An invisible power seemed to settle like a steel net over his gestures. A year later nothing remained of the lovely grace which had given pleasure to all who looked at him. You can ask any of the other teachers and they will know exactly the student I mean and be able to confirm what happened.'



Narcissus