## Notes on Features of Theatre Form and Period - June 2008

These notes are pertinent to **AS 90610** 'Demonstrate knowledge of theatre form or period by analysing and interpreting two scripted texts' and are provided as guidance for teachers and learners. They indicate the main features of form and period around which interpretation and analysis of the plays on the [Prescribed Texts](http://www.nzqa.govt.nz/ncea/resources/drama/texts.html) for 2008 may be undertaken. The notes are neither prescriptive nor exhaustive, and will be updated in 2009 to reflect the changed Prescribed Texts list.

### Greek Tragedy: Antigone, Medea

5 th c. B.C., amphitheatre (orchestra, skene); 3 masked male actors using large gestures to connect with 20,000 in festival audiences; chorus (12/15): 4 roles - introduce play, witness private acts, challenge characters and comment on action/society (parabasis directly to the audience); unity of place; continuous time; no violence on stage; messenger role to describe graphic scenes; stichomythia ; Aristototelian structure (parados , episode/stasimon x5, exodus); anagorisis; hamartia; hubris; mythological origins to stories; importance of Gods in everyday life; ekkyklema, Deus ex machina ending to **Medea;** catharsis; protagonist subjected to crisis that leads to suffering and self-understanding and perception of the power of the Gods over humans.

### Greek Comedy: The Frogs

405 B.C., satirical allusions to Gods, playwrights and politics; commentary on contemporary society and events such as the Peloponnesian War; agon as central debate or competition; dithyrambic dancing, singing chorus, trained by the choregos; flute players; farce and fantasy, lavish costuming; phalloi; chitons; bathos; puns; crude humour (scatology); physical representation of journey to the underworld.

### Shakespearean

Male actors playing to three sides and levels; thrust stage: flow on/off entrances /exits; audience interaction; no stage lighting; iambic pentameter blank verse; rhyming couplets to indicate end of scenes; use of dramatic irony; Elizabethan costuming with symbolic additions to change era; the Wheel of Fortune; the Great Chain of Being; the Four Humours influencing personality types (phlegmatic, choleric, melancholic, sanguine)

### Elizabethan tragedy

Soliloquies to reveal thoughts and motivation; stage- fighting (duels); multiple deaths; last important living character speaks the last lines.

#### Hamlet

Use of trap-door for ghost and grave; prose (Gravedigger scene); disease imagery; play within a play; revenge key idea etc

#### Macbeth

Belief in supernatural (the power of witches); hubris; ?dark' imagery; prose as comic relief (Porter scene); ambition key idea etc

### Elizabethan Comedy

#### A Midsummer Night's Dream

Blend of fantasy and reality; play within a play and on-stage audience device; juxtaposition of worlds: Athenian court/ lovers/ mechanicals and The Immortals; verse (couplets)/poetry/comic dialogue; magic; nature and animal imagery; sense of place created through visual imagery; the transforming power of love; the nature of marriage; interference of parents in love affairs; results of jealousy and antagonism; the value of imagination; the purpose of drama and entertainment.

#### Twelfth Night

Saturnalian misrule: reversals and excesses; emblematic characters; comedy of errors; disguise through cross-dressing; doubling e.g. twins; gender-bending plot; the capriciousness of love; music and song; eavesdropping and the exposure of fools.

### Russian Realism

#### The Cherry Orchard

Tragicomedy ('objectively comic and subjectively painful'); clearly delineated characters with complex psychology (Stanislavskian detail); unifying mood; complete and simple action; detailed stage directions; naturalist set proscenium box-set; portable props; natural sound to evoke mood/place; costumes replicating reality; use of symbol; sense of decay and self-perpetuating frustration.

### Victorian Comedy of Manners

#### Pygmalion

Fabian Shavian influence: political views on class system; Cockney dialect versus 'received pronunciation'; comic drama of ideas; mimicry; gender relationships; status reversal; transformation story based on Greek mythology.

#### The Importance of Being Earnest

Parody of the stock characters of comedy; epigrams that puncture conventional sentiments and affectations; linguistic dexterity: wit, puns, aphorisms; clever plot of misunderstandings and revelations; symbolic character names.

### Epic Theatre

#### Mother Courage

Political theatre; verfremdungseffekt- dislocating habitual perspectives; gestus ; underplayed overstatement; episodic structure ('eyes on the course, not on finish'); emphasis on characters' journey or challenge; historification of theme; use of song; chorus, sound effects; rhythmic, poetic language; 'breaking the fourth wall'; Marxist perspective; dialectical argument and enquiry; juxtaposition of conflicting ideologies; didactic purpose aiming to make audience think; visible technology and brightly lit stage; minimal set; use of titles, placards, captions, projection signs; authentic, well-used props; earthy colours.

### Absurdism

Minimal exposition regarding plot or characters background; lack of memory; disconnected characters; quick changes of mood; master/servant game-playing; non-sequiturs; irrationality; repetition of language and routines; no plot development; existentialism; post-world war pessimism about human condition and cruelty of existence; dream/nightmare quality to scenes.

#### The Birthday Party

British 1950s 'comedy of menace' - repertory thriller overtones; Pinteresque language: loaded pauses, subtext, carefully orchestrated rhetoric, patterns of everyday speech; naturalistic talk in stylized 3 act structure; evasive communication; 'the world is a room'; exposure of insecurity; ambiguity as to who is the victim; the need for a spirit of resistance to social conformity and dead ideas; obsessive memories/yearnings for past 'golden days'; underlying threat of violence.

#### Waiting for Godot

Characters representing the human condition; spiritual derelicts, isolated in time and space; inability to connect with people, time and space; a litany of unanswered questions; obsession with inanimate objects; slapstick clowning; poetic metaphorical language; circular time; disintegration of language; minimalist, symbolic set.

### Post-war American Realism

Detailed stage directions; believable characters/situations; scenes of heightened reality; psychologically truthful characterization; emphasis on sub-text; use of symbol; elements of expressionism; accuracy of dress; no need for 'happy endings'; detailed domestic life.

#### The Crucible

Specific/time and place; formal language structure invented for 16 th c. characters and to help actor play the scene; 4 acts: each end on high point; topical/controversial issues addressed; engagement with real life; Proctor's drama as tragedy of 'common man': self-examination arriving at new realisation, making a choice, self-recognition leads to destruction despite affirmation of life; politically challenging to current regimes.

#### The Glass Menagerie

A memory play: narrator commentary as flashback; fluid use of time; atmospheric music/lighting; illusion/reality; cutaway set with gauze screens; human limitations combined with high aspirations; sense of loss and suffering; symbolic poetic language; long monologues.

### Feminist Political Theatre

#### Top Girls

Socialist/feminist play about power; overlapping dialogue; post-modern multiple realities - fictional/historical mix; allusions to history; storytelling; diachronic time; no linear plot development; episodic structure; open ending; breaking of taboo topics through provocative language; domesticity vs professional choices; the presence of a downtrodden or forgotten character.

#### The Revenge of the Amazons

1970s feminist parody of A Midsummer Night's Dream; spoof play within a play; ensemble script creation; juxtaposition of worlds; Shakespearean language vs NZ slang; comic stereotypes; role-reversal; over-the-top costuming; taboo sexual topics.

### Australian Theatre

#### Away

Magic realism - Australian vernacular/poetic language mix; set in specific time and place; importance of beach culture; Shakespearean/Greek allusions; multi-layered meanings; framed by play extracts; ensemble vs relationship duologue scenes; open set-design.

### New Zealand Theatre

Concern with New Zealand history and the concept of national identity and sense of belonging; issues of land, racism, colonialism, tradition, morality, spirituality, family/whanau; Tikanga Maori vs the world of the Pakeha; displacement/loss; characters finding and using authentic language; New Zealand archetypal characters etc

#### The Pohutakawa Tree

Specific time/place; guardianship vs ownership; youth rebelling against values of elders; impact of culture, religion, history, social/class/race attitudes; maintaining control; misguided pride and loss; waiata, te reo and 1950s slang; symbol incorporated into set; Maori/Pakeha rituals; polygod/Christianity conflict.

#### Children of the Poor

Specific time and place and historical authenticity, based on the biography of John A. Lee; borrowing from European theatre traditions, such as music-hall, Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty and Brecht (use of song, chorus, breaking of the fourth wall; episodic structure; dialectical purpose).

#### Shuriken

NZ post-colonialism; set in specific time and place; language mix of kiwi slang, Japanese and Māori; cultural view of foreigners; ritualistic action; macho war-time claustrophobia; exposure of historical mistreatment of prisoners; cathartic ending.

#### Wednesday to Come

Women as unsung recorders of history; the impact of politics and economics on families and relationships; realistic set and props - a 'kitchen-sink drama' with extensive domestic activity, such as making scones; awkward relationships between men and women; archetypal inter-generational roles of women; individual responses to dealing with grief/loss; live music to enhance mood; the value of emotional honesty as catharsis; public vs private worlds; integrity of political action; history repeating itself; the young representing hope for the future; naturalistic dialogue using New Zealand idioms and accents.

### Maori Theatre

#### Waiora

Specific time and place; importance of land, whanau; spiritual world as an omnipresent force; Maori identity; urban/rural contrast; dispossession; racism; biculturalism; mana/shame; use of te reo, waiata, kapa haka; ancestors as chorus; contrasting aspirations of characters; arrival of a stranger who reveals past/present.

#### Purapurawhetu

Themes of identity, dis-location, relocation, mana and contested leadership; Maori spiritualism, politics, culture in foreground; use of te reo and waiata; weaving as a motif; use of flashbacks and the juxtaposition of two worlds; poetic language mixed with vernacular Americanisms; tangata whenua perspective on history; presence of lost child through disembodied voice; loss of memory; theatre as cosmos; historical allusions to 1990s Maori politics such as foreshore rights.

### Pacifica Theatre

#### Niu Sila

Multi-cultural NZ comedy of manners; Pacifica/Pakeha juxtaposition; use of Samoan and contemporary slang; physical theatre; actors playing multiple roles with versatile physicality; stereotype spoofing; use of symbolic set and minimal props; importance of family; issues of racism and physical abuse; cross-cultural friendships; allusions to the 1980 dawn raids and recent Asian immigration.

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