

Part 1 A guide to dramatic conventions

Rationale

The definitions of theatre offered above have stressed a broad unity across a range of activities that have the imaginative and fictional use of time, space and presence as their common feature. Theatre is not seen as a narrow or exclusive set of culturally bound forms. The definitions are chosen in order to fix the book in contexts where theatre is being created by ordinary people and in recognition of the need to define a process in theatre that provides a continuity and development of experience across an age range that finds its first theatre experiences in play; to a generation that finds its satisfaction in a wide variety of contexts, including seeing and being in plays. These definitions influenced the selection of conventions in two important ways that, together, reflect the values of theatre and education held in this book:

- The conventions and the examples emphasise interactive forms of interchange, even fusion, of the roles of spectator and actor, rather than those conventions associated with performance where the roles of spectator and actor tend to be more clearly defined. *The conventions selected are mainly concerned with the process of theatre as a means of developing understanding about both human experience and theatre itself.* This may, or may not, later become translated and communicated through performance.
- The conventions have been chosen to emphasise theatre's traditional role as an educative form of entertainment that responds to a basic human need to interpret and express the world through symbolic form. The conventions recognise that theatre is not taught, rather that our own basic uses of theatre in play and other forms of imitative behaviour become refined and developed by experiencing increasingly complex relationships of convention and content. *The conventions selected, therefore, form a bridge between spontaneous and innate uses of theatre and the more poetic conventions of performance craft.* They are consciously associated with other familiar popular culture forms in order to stress the familiarity and pervasiveness of theatre.

Classification and criteria for selection

The conventions have been organised into groups that represent four varieties of dramatic action:



Context-building action

Conventions that either 'set the scene', or add information to the context of the drama as it unfolds.



Narrative action

Conventions that tend to emphasise the 'story' or 'what-happens-next' dimension of the drama.



Poetic action

Conventions that emphasise or create the symbolic potential of the drama through highly selective use of language and gesture.



Reflective action

Conventions that emphasise 'soliloquy' or 'inner-thinking' in the drama, or allow groups to review the drama from within the dramatic context.

This classification is not intended to be hierarchical or sequential.

A convention achieves value through being appropriate to the moment for which it has been selected, and the dynamic nature of theatre requires shifts to and from different varieties of action as the experience unfolds.

The idea of a classification system is based on the notion that any such classification will be fluid in its boundaries and will serve as a means of making the entire list of conventions more manageable when choices about form need to be made. The handling of a convention in practice may result in a crossover of boundaries; a move from narrative action to poetic action, for instance.

The classification has been developed in response to certain basic needs required for participation, either as a spectator or as an actor, in dramatic activity:

- **Need for a clearly defined context**
Theatre presents us with imagined situations in which a shared understanding of place, time, characters and other contextual information becomes crucial to the quality of involvement in the experience.
- **Need to nurture and create an interest in 'what happens next'**
Theatre is defined as a narrative form, like story and film, in which curiosity about the storyline and a sense of imminent action act as motivation for those acting or spectating in the dramatic event.

- **Need to recognise and create a symbolic dimension to the work**

Theatre provides a means of looking beyond the immediate story or plot through the symbols, ambiguities and imagery that are capable of crystallising, projecting and holding the essence of an experience.

- **Need to reflect on the meanings and themes that emerge through the experience**

Theatre provides a 'mirror' in which actors and spectators can consider themselves and their relationship to others.

- **Need for choices to be made about the form of the work**

Emphasis on participants gaining knowledge of the demands and uses of different conventions allows for a negotiated choice of conventions. *Psychologically, the group need to feel comfortable and protected enough to risk themselves in the convention. The organiser or facilitator often needs to negotiate a convention that creates a balance between the desire to motivate and inspire the group and the need to keep the activity controlled and manageable.*

Organisation of entries for the conventions

The entry for each convention is necessarily brief and practically orientated. An entry does not aim to represent a convention fully in its complexity. Indeed, an understanding of the particularity or essential qualities of a convention is seen as growing, in part, from the participants' active experimentation with form. It also develops through a shared analysis of the interaction between form and content that begins when the participants are provided with the opportunity and climate in which to articulate and make sense of their own felt responses to the use of a convention in practice.

The entry for each convention is arranged under the following headings:

- **Description**

An explanation of how the convention is operated, and the different forms it might take. There will be many other variations of each convention that are not identified.

- **Cultural connections**

The purpose of this section is to recognise and raise the status of theatre as a cultural resource that taps people's shared understanding of media/story conventions as well as conventions associated with their own immediate culture – that in turn reflects specific class, gender and racial variations and qualities. There is an emphasis on conventions that are borrowed from, or closely connect with, popular culture.

- **Learning opportunity**

Each convention mediates and transforms meanings in a different way. For instance, meanings associated with family life are fundamentally different when expressed through dance conventions as opposed to monologue or soliloquy. This heading attempts to give a broad outline of the learning features highlighted by each convention in order to give some idea of what each represents as a form of learning.

- **Examples**

Very brisk snapshots of conventions in practice that illustrate a convention being used for a particular purpose. The examples are not complete lessons or workshops; they are isolated moments taken from more extensive and coherent programmes.

Two of the major limitations of this section need to be stressed:

- Each convention described within the section appears isolated from others by the need to identify and separate conventions for the sake of clarity. In practice there is an integration of form in which conventions run into each other, or overlap, or merge into new composite conventions. An essential feature of theatre is that the dramatic experience develops and accumulates, so that responses to a convention used at one stage in the experience have to be taken within the context of the responses generated by the previous convention and the responses offered by the convention that follows. The possibility of creating relationships between conventions in order to develop ideas or to give an appropriate rhythm to the structure of a dramatic exercise – its own internal coherence – is seen as a central skill-area in theatre.
- The list of conventions that follows is not intended to impress or overwhelm in terms of quantity: *the real skill is not in making lists but in knowing which convention to select in order to establish appropriateness between:*
 - (a) the needs and experience of the group
 - (b) the content chosen for the drama
 - (c) opportunities for learning.

A. Context-building action

Circle of life	Making maps/diagrams
Circular drama	Objects of character
Collective character	Role-on-the-wall
Collective drawing	Simulations
Commission	Soundtracking
Defining space	Still-image
Diaries, letters, journals, messages	Theory-building
First impressions	The iceberg
Games	The ripple
Guided tour	Unfinished materials

Uses

These conventions enable a group to create or engage with the dramatic context: the concrete particulars of the situation, characters or roles that will inform and drive the action. They are helpful when there is a need to:

- clarify the context through fixing time, place and people involved
- create atmosphere through use of space, light and sound
- draw attention to contextual constraints or opportunities
- find and make symbols and themes for the work
- check out possible different interpretations of the context held in the group.

Cultural origins

Life experience of building dens, designing rooms, arranging furniture; expectations created by different settings – dark woods, high-tech rooms, and so on. Conventions are drawn from theatre/film, e.g. **soundtracking** and **defining space** (set-building), and from psychotherapy, e.g. **games**, **simulations** and **still-image**.

Level of demand

Because the work is to do with setting up the context, rather than acting within it, there is little threat or personal risk involved. The work is indirect and involves groups contributing to a context that will be shared. *Commitment to dramatic action is gained through the small-group work and the sense of ownership generated, as well as through the interest created in seeing how the context might be used in the drama.*



Circle of life

Description

A large sheet of paper is divided into five sections with a circle in the centre of the page where the name and age of a character are written. The surrounding paper is then divided into four sections that will represent areas of that character's life and the people they interact with at those times. These sections are labelled: **Home**, **Family**, **Play** and **Day**.

The heading **Home** indicates where the character normally lives, while **Family** indicates any immediate or extended family and may include estranged family members we might otherwise expect to find at home. **Play** indicates any type of social life and, finally, **Day** indicates the character's workplace, if appropriate, or otherwise encompasses their daily routine, for example if they are too young to work or are unemployed. These headings are hopefully as value-free as possible so that groups can determine for themselves the specifics of the entries to be made. The group then brainstorms ideas about the character and these ideas are entered into the appropriate section.

The group is then subdivided into four smaller groups, each of which takes a different section and creates a short dialogue between the central character and one other character selected from their chosen section of the diagram. These encounters are initially based on the previous collective agreements.

Cultural connections

Significant others; those whose lives influence our own; Google Plus – the organisation of one's circles; WhatsApp – groups and their representation of different aspects of one's life; Pinterest – people represent their areas of interest and activities.

Learning opportunities

Negotiation and selection of content; sequencing of ideas; building a complex character from minimal clues; extrapolating and analysing human behaviour on the basis of influences and social relationships.

Example

- 1 As the starting point for an exploratory drama the group are shown the following brief performance with the organiser in the role as Sunita.

My name is Sunita. I am fourteen. That is my mother. (She points to another actor standing with her back to Sunita (**prepared roles**),) She is in the kitchen washing the dishes. In the sitting room I can see her bag lying open on a chair. This is my only chance of being saved. My little brother and father are outside playing football. The room is empty. I hate what I must do. I love my mother but I have no choice. I must have that money.

Part 1 A guide to dramatic conventions

The organiser now improvises with the mother character using whatever distractions/excuses/tactics necessary to take the money. The mother's prepared role has been briefed so that she can make further character information available to the group by, for example, calling upstairs for both her husband and son by name during this encounter. As she leaves Sunita again narrates:

I can't believe I've done it. I hate myself for what I've done.
 Perhaps I can put it back before she notices ... no, too late.
 I can hear my father coming downstairs. That's it. No turning back. I've done it now. At least I'll be safe.

The organiser comes out of the role and facilitates a discussion on what the group have learnt from what they have seen and the group come up with what is for them the main question of the drama: what does Sunita mean by 'At least I'll be safe'?

Figure 1 represents the preliminary decision-making following these inputs with information gleaned from both Sunita and her mother, and this becomes the basis for the initial, small-group improvisations that follow. New information can be added as it is clarified.

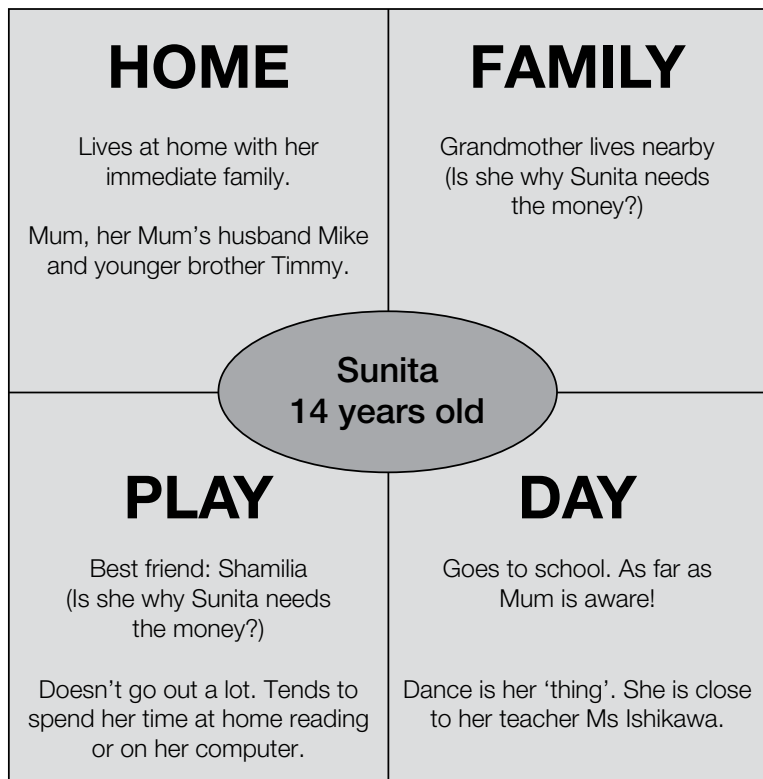


Figure 1 The group's entries about Sunita



Circular drama

Description

This convention is essentially a more manageable form of **teacher-in-role** for the less experienced and less confident. The group is organised into a series of subgroups, each of which has a specific relationship with a central character. The group decide on their individual roles and the physical location of their group. The organiser takes on the role of the central character and enters the small-group action in random sequence, improvising briefly with each group before moving on. The remaining groups are audience during this activity.

Cultural connections

Scenes in any form of drama that reveal a central character's story or journey and relationships with other characters; an online MMORPGs profile gaming history; YouTube Profiles and their comment history and subscription list.

Learning opportunities

Provides the opportunity to see the different ways in which a character reacts in a variety of public and private contexts; deepens understanding of choices to be made; fun.

Example

- 1 Participants are exploring *The Wise Old Woman* (Prentice Hall & IBD, 1994), a story by Yoshiko Uchida involving the central dilemma of a young farmer, living in a village ruled by a cruel lord, who is ordered by the lord to take his elderly mother (the Wise Old Woman of the story) and leave her to die on a mountainside because she is too old. Four groups are established as follows:

Old Woman's friends – in the tea-house

Market traders – in the marketplace

Farmer's friends – in the inn

Young children of the village – in a play area.

The time is the evening of the day before the Wise Old Woman is due to be taken away. The organiser, in role as the Wise Old Woman, improvises with each of the groups, challenging their thinking. So if the group feel that she should not submit, then she stresses duty and tradition. If, however, the group feel she must do what she is told, then she stresses her love of life and the favours she has previously done for those in the group, e.g. all those sweets she has given to the young children when she's seen them around the village!



Collective character

Description

A character is improvised by a group, any one of whom can speak as that character. Alternatively, an individual opts to take on the role and the remainder of the group whisper advice and offer lines of dialogue to be spoken by the volunteer. In this way a large group can be involved in the creation of a dialogue with, for instance, subgroups taking on responsibility for each of the characters involved. In order to encourage contributions there need not be conformity in the early responses and different attitudes can initially be given expression. However, in the long term decisions will need to be made on the truthfulness of a character's responses in order to achieve a unified, collective representation.

Cultural connections

Team games; **rituals** and **ceremonies**; Facerig and other digital embodiment software; Xbox Kinect and shared avatar manipulation.

Learning opportunities

Requires participants to work sensitively and collectively; sharing a role through alternative portrayals; tests out character responses in action; helps provide a more complex character for further exploration.

Examples

- 1 In a play-building drama based on an advert in a corner shop placed by a woman selling her wedding dress, wedding and engagement rings, small groups have built up a series of scenes to show why the marriage might have gone wrong. At the end of the drama a dialogue is held between the 'woman who sells the dress' (the voice of experience) and 'the woman who comes to buy the dress' (the voice of innocence). Two volunteers silently represent the women while the rest of the group decide which 'woman' they wish to speak for and place themselves behind the appropriate role.
- 2 In a drama based on Angela Carter's re-telling of the Little Red Riding Hood story (*The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*), the group take on the collective role of Little Red Riding Hood in order to work with the **teacher in role** as the mother. Individuals can ask any questions of the mother in order to elicit information about the context and setting of the story.

Elaboration

In this variation of a basic convention called 'Echoes', two volunteers, each supported by other group members, play characters involved in a dialogue. These individuals provide this dialogue through short sentences and phrases, which are echoed by the subgroups supporting them.



Collective drawing

Description	Working either as one group or in small groups participants make a collective image to represent a place or people in the drama. The image then becomes a concrete reference for ideas that are being discussed, or that are half-perceived.
Cultural connections	Illustrations; media imagery; photos of urban/rural landscapes; portraits; use of drawing for own purposes; comics; cartoons; posters; postcards; online collaborative drawing software such as Adobe Photoshop Touch, Brushes 3, or Sketchbook Pro.
Learning opportunities	Giving form to imagined places and faces; negotiating a common response in relation to appearances; researching authenticity in drawings of different cultures or historical periods; division of labour in performing the task.

Examples

- 1 A group of 'pioneers' are planning to go West on a wagon train. In order to establish their motives for undertaking such an epic journey, and how it fits with their past, the group prepare two **collective drawings** for display – one represents the place they have migrated from, with clues as to what made them leave; the second represents their imaginings of their destination.
- 2 A group working on 'Mining' have just read Sid Chaplin's *Hands* (Penguin English Project 'Danger', Ward Lock, 1977). The story describes an accident in which the narrator's father is crushed by a rockfall, so that his hands are all that is left exposed. In the role of book illustrators, groups work with charcoal and chalk to make images depicting the end of the story.
- 3 A group are working with Antony Browne's *Into the Forest* (Walker Books, 2004) in which a young boy is woken by a terrible sound in the night and in the morning finds his father has gone from home. His mother sends him into the forest to take a cake to his grandmother, who is unwell. As the boy goes through the forest he meets various fairy-tale characters, who try to take his grandmother's cake. Eventually he discovers that his father has not disappeared but has instead gone to look after his grandmother.

The group makes a **collective drawing** of the forest on a long roll of paper. They work in detail and consider different zones of the forest. When they are finished, a volunteer walks through the forest while the rest of the group provide a **soundscape** of his journey. The forest is used as a set during the drama that follows and finally the boy and his father return home, while the group provide a second **soundscape** – how have the boy's perceptions of the forest changed?