

Activity 2: Episodic storytelling

Choose a classic fairy tale, play or news story in small groups.

Divide the story (or a part of the story) into three clear episodes.

Give each episode a title that describes the content of that episode. Where you choose to start and end their story is entirely up to them. Example using Cinderella:

Episode 1 – Cinderella is bullied by her Stepmother and Sisters.

Episode 2 – Cinderella's Fairy Godmother magically arrives.

Episode 3 – Delighted Cinderella goes to the ball.

Picking one of the episodes, You should choose a theatrical technique from the list below and apply this to the performance of a specific episode.

The aim is simple, clear storytelling, making sure that the key elements of plot are not lost under the theatrics. You should choose an appropriate technique to communicate the episode clearly.

1. Chorus of reaction –

a group of people (outsiders) react in chorus and narrate that episode of the story from a more objective point of view. In Cinderella, the people at the ball could describe what they witnessed as Cinderella arrived and met the Prince, identifying the clear facial expressions associated with this to encourage clarity of attitude.

(Splendid normally use six clear facial expressions: happiness, sadness, anger, fear, shock and disgust.)

You can relate this back to the Brechtian term Gestus.

Write up what you did:

2. The Villain's point of view

In order to give the spectator an alternative opinion, can we view an episode through the eyes of the antagonist? In Cinderella the Stepmother is often painted as a monster. To put across a more human aspect we might:

- Have the Stepmother narrate the episode using a more naturalistic physical and vocal characterisation, or the subtext of the episode from her perspective
- Experiment with the position of the character in relation to the audience to encourage sympathy.
- As in the previous activity, we could juxtapose the character's public nastiness ('I hate Cinderella!') with a moment of private honesty ('I wish I was young again').

You should consider anything that challenges the archetype of the 'villain'.

This links back to the Verfremdungseffekt in Brechtian theatre, allowing the audience to see something in a new light.

Write up what you did:

3. Breaking the Fourth Wall –

Experiment with involving the audience directly in an episode either vocally or physically. What purpose in the narrative could this serve?

In Cinderella the audience could become dance partners at the ball, each being told tiny fragments about the mystery woman dancing with the Prince, or the spectators could become the magical items transformed by the Fairy Godmother.

Bringing an audience into a scene is always interesting and exciting, but you need to be clear about who the audience are, what function they are fulfilling, and why this is a good idea.

What effect does this have on an audience?

How could they make that involvement something that could provoke thought or debate:

Write up what your exploration:

4. Actor as object or scenery

Narrate an episode from the point of view of an object or environment who witnessed the action. In Cinderella:

- How would a grand ballroom speak about Cinderella in comparison with the simple kitchen here Cinderella lives?
- What would Cinderella's broom say if it could speak?

What if all the actors played the broom and swept up the audience while telling them what she has 'gone through'? As it is clearly not 'realistic', this technique automatically promotes objectivity on events.

It can create comedy (which relates to Brechtian 'Spas'), but can also assist in making a wider socio-political point (Cinderella's shiny and expensive glass slipper might not wish to be placed on the foot of someone so poor and insignificant).

It gives students the challenge of solving a theatrical problem: how exactly do we portray a grand ballroom?

Write up what your exploration:

5. Removing language from the episode

The actors create the characters, scenery, props and costume for an episode without relying on language.

Instead, they use onomatopoeic words, stretched sounds, plosives, pitch, tone and clear intention to communicate narrative, atmosphere and meaning.

In Commedia dell'arte this is called 'grammelot'.

This is a language of nonsense that is nonetheless understandable to everyone. We often reference the work of the psychologist Albert Mehrabian, who stated that communication is made up of the following elements:

- 38% tone of voice
- 55% body language
- 7% words.

This technique demonstrates that language should not be solely relied upon to communicate meaning. As a group you will then repeat the process for the other episodes, choosing a different technique from the list or devising one of their own.

The three episodes are then rehearsed and performed.

To develop this exercise, You can consider the following questions:

- How does the order of the episodes affect how an audience understand the story? Could you start at the end of the story? Does a non-linear story give a new perspective on events?
- How can they use the titles to assist with clarity? How can they be presented (eg. on placards, in chorus, spoken by a specific character, or the actors out of role)?

Write up your exploration: