



External Assessment Report 2014

Subject(s)	Drama
Level(s)	Higher

The statistics used in this report are prior to the outcome of any Post Results Services requests

This report provides information on the performance of candidates which it is hoped will be useful to teachers/lecturers in their preparation of candidates for future examinations. It is intended to be constructive and informative and to promote better understanding. It would be helpful to read this report in conjunction with the published question papers and marking instructions for the examination.

Comments on candidate performance

General comments

The total number of Higher Drama candidates this year has increased by 218 showing an encouraging increase from the previous year. The percentage of candidates passing the Higher Drama Exam was up 3.9% from last year.

As was the case last year, Visiting Assessors (VA) were very complementary about the way the acting exam was administered and the welcome they received from centres. Many mentioned how privileged and uplifted they felt on seeing such a range of work and the very high standard of the acting. The commitment of staff and candidates continues to be commended.

Markers reported that the Question Paper responses in 2014 were better than those of last year. Many candidates performed particularly well in Section A of the exam which was most encouraging. Candidates' use of timing seems to have improved this year, and almost all answered all three sections of the paper.

The Crucible is still the most popular prescribed text, followed by *Antigone*, *The Birthday Party*, *Lovers*, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *The House of Bernarda Alba* and *A Taste of Honey*. Very few centres attempted *Twelfth Night*, but some who did scored highly.

An encouragingly wide range of Contemporary Scottish Theatre plays continue to be used for the Acting exam. In the Question Paper, *Men Should Weep*, *The Steamie* and *Tally's Blood* remain firm favourites, followed by *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* and *Black Watch*. *Dunsinane* was a popular text this year, particularly for Question 12.

Although one-act plays are still being taught, candidates can be disadvantaged because they use this as a second CST text, rather than using a full-length play. However this is happening less often than it used to, which is most encouraging. A number of centres have asked what now constitutes a one-act play when so many new plays are performed in a single sitting. A good rule of thumb is that one-act plays would not be classed as an evening's entertainment at the theatre.

Areas in which candidates performed well

Candidates performed very well in the Acting component of the exam. This level of excellence is due to the continued commitment of staff and candidates to the exam. Many VAs commented on the pleasure they had visiting centres and seeing work of such a high standard. It was obvious that candidates thoroughly enjoyed this experience and approached the task with real enthusiasm, at times coming in to their centre to do extra work during holidays and weekends. Teamwork is to be commended; often candidates will learn another role to support their peers and their level of interaction is to be commended.

Candidates also scored well in Section A of the Question Paper. Many centres had taken the time to teach this aspect of the Course to a very high standard, and candidates demonstrated strong knowledge particularly in the first part of the question.

Some candidates performed very well in the Dramatic Commentary, scoring almost full marks.

Areas which candidates found demanding

Candidates found the second part of Section A, and the Section C question of the Question Paper challenging. This was compounded because many did not read the question posed and instead relied on pre-prepared answers. In some cases this year, like last year, candidates would have been fully able to answer the questions asked, they just failed to read what was in front of them.

Ground Plans and the technical part of Dramatic Commentary continue to confound some candidates, even though they are the most accessible six marks in the paper.

This year some candidates drew ground plans for a different scene from that of the Dramatic Commentary. This was disappointing because the quality of many Dramatic Commentaries was good so instead of scoring high marks, many scored lower marks through lack of attention to detail in the technical column and ground plan.

Section A

Question 1

What is the most moving or emotional scene between two or more characters in your prescribed text?

As a director how would you present this scene to achieve the desired response from your audience?

This question was well done in the main.

Surprisingly, it was popular with many candidates studying *The Importance of Being Earnest* and the scene chosen was Jack's proposal to Gwendolen.

Those who answered on the last act of *The Crucible*, on the Prologue in *Antigone* and the last act of *The House of Bernarda Alba* found that it particularly suited their prescribed text and generally they scored well. However, many doing *The Importance of Being Earnest* also scored well, despite this not being the most logical question choice for their text.

Question 2

Who are the most comic and/or tragic characters in your prescribed text? Why do you think this?

As a director how would you work with your actors to perform these roles to maximum comic/tragic effect? You should write about more than one scene in the play.

This question could have included rehearsal and performance techniques, so was very open-ended.

A number of candidates chose to write about their acting scene and did not refer to any other parts of the play, so penalising themselves. This was particularly pertinent to *Abigail* in *The Crucible*. This was a question which suited *Twelfth Night*, *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *Antigone* and some who chose this question scored well.

Question 3

Consider and explain the key themes in your prescribed text. As a director explain how the visual and aural elements of your production would develop the audience's understanding of the key themes of your prescribed text.

This was another very accessible question, but some seemed unsure of 'aural'. This term has been used before and candidates should be acquainted with it.

Some candidates only answered this question from the perspective of acting and did not mention aspects of design or special effects, which could have enhanced their answer. Most candidates are asked to create their own directorial concept, so it seemed strange that they did not employ this for the question.

Question 4

Choose a character, who appears in more than one scene, in your prescribed text. Explain the motivation of this character. As an actor explain how you would perform this role making his/her motivation clear to your audience.

The first part of this question was generally well done and many candidates scored well, which is unsurprising as this is what they have to do for their Acting exam. Many, however, found the second part of the question problematic. As this is what they have to do practically in their Acting exam, it is difficult to understand why some candidates find it such a challenge.

Many acting concepts were general and non-specific. '*I would stand tall*'. '*I would speak in a loud tone*'. '*I would gesture*'. Responses have to be specific.

Considering the amount of rehearsal involved by all candidates in order to reach such a high standard of acting performance, every candidate had the potential to have scored well in the second part of the question, but a sizable number did not.

Section B

Dramatic Commentary – ground plans

The Dramatic Commentary is an area where pupils generally perform well. However, the quality of ground plans varies enormously. The marks allocated to ground plan are the most accessible four marks in the paper, but every year the quality of candidate response is very variable. Sometimes they bear no relation to Section A of the Question Paper, despite numerous reminders that the two must correlate. The most common problems are:

- ◆ Drawing a ground plan for the wrong scene.

- ◆ Chairs or other items of furniture blocking entrances and exits.
- ◆ Forgetting to state there is an audience.
- ◆ Forgetting to put entrances and exits on the key.
- ◆ Not having the correct number of characters on stage.
- ◆ In the case of *Antigone*, forgetting the Chorus.
- ◆ Having illogical staging.

Technical column

Another area where candidates often fail to gain two marks is in the technical column of the Dramatic Commentary. They are requested to give an opening lighting state (which includes the colour and intensity of the light), justify the effect, and mark it on the script.

Moves and interpretation

The biggest error here is not using theatrical terminology and so losing three marks. Paying attention to these nine marks in total (ground plan, moves and interpretation, and the technical column) could really pull a candidate's Question Paper mark up. Another common problem is that some candidates do a very detailed piece of direction for the first part of the text but then leave large gaps in the middle of the text with no direction offered at all. They finish off by directing the last part of the text. It is best to direct the full piece of text instead of detailing the beginning and having to end in haste.

Section C

The most popular questions were 6, 7, 10, 11 and 12. Questions 8, 9 and 13 were seldom done. More candidates are attempting the performance analysis and some did it reasonably well.

Question 6

With reference to two or more contemporary Scottish plays that you have seen or read, describe the audience's reactions to the situations and events depicted in each drama. You must make reference to the social and/or political and/or religious issues raised in each drama.

Many candidates took this as an opportunity to look at the social issues that arise in CST texts and answered it reasonably well. It is important to read the question, however, as others just listed the social issues and did not refer to the audience reaction, and so, lost marks.

Question 7

'As a nation we have much to be proud of. We are a tolerant country, people are wealthy, most people are in work, housing is good and there is equality of the sexes. We were not always so fortunate'.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with any of the points made in this statement? You must make reference to two or more plays you have seen or read.

This question was reasonably well done, but some candidates forgot to refer to 'We were not always so fortunate'. It was a question that suited the more popular texts.

Very few candidates approached Question 8 on nostalgia, or Question 9 on the use of popular tradition. Some seemed unfamiliar with the aspects of popular tradition, and it was important to know these to be able to cope adequately with the question.

Question 10

Discuss the extent to which contemporary Scottish playwrights explore dysfunctional relationships in their plays. You should illustrate your answer with reference to two or more plays you have seen or read.

This question was not answered well because, despite being given a dictionary definition, some did not understand the word 'dysfunctional'.

It was an ideal question for those who had studied *Men Should Weep*, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, *Bondagers*. Some, however, tried to shoehorn plays, which did not have many dysfunctional relationships, into the question and did not consider arguing against it.

Question 11

How has contemporary Scottish theatre told the stories of women's lives? You may wish to consider some of the following: family life; friendships; marriage; relationships; working lives.

You should illustrate your answer with reference to two or more plays you have seen or read.

This question was relatively well done, though some fell into the pattern of writing about strong women or stereotypes. Strong women could have been incorporated into the answer, but this was a question about women's lives and it is vital to answer the question posed.

Question 12

The candidates who tackled the performance analysis knew their material well and answered the question asked. Some used the *Black Watch* production at the SECC in Glasgow, which had clearly enthused them. However, others had pre-prepared their responses, and some of these came across as stock answers which often read as a list of points. *Dunsinane* was another popular text and seemed to have interested most who saw it though some candidates responded with the same pre-prepared answers. A recurring issue in this question was that answers were too general. In a performance analysis it is important to be specific in the points made.

Question 13

This question was not attempted.

Advice to centres for preparation of future candidates

Acting

Much of this advice has been given in previous years but it is worth repeating as the same problems occur year on year.

Use of scripts and prompts

As has been said in previous years, it is advisable to have no scripts on stage. The Acting exam is worth 50% of the total mark. Candidates are marked on their ability to interact with others, and if others are reading from a script, no convincing interaction can occur.

It is important that candidates know their lines. An occasional prompt is understandable, but to have successive prompts suggests a lack of preparation and prompts inevitably take candidates out of character.

Selection of Acting texts

It is important that candidates are cast in parts where they can empathise with the character they play. Sometimes, in an effort to show the full play, certain candidates seem to be allocated parts for which they are unsuited. To cast a girl as Proctor in Scene 4 of *The Crucible* is a tall ask, as is the casting of a girl as Proctor in Act 1 with Abigail.

Use of costume

It is helpful that, if candidates are not costumed for a period play, they should use blacks and the length of skirts should be in keeping with the period of the play.

This year, as with last, Visiting Assessors specifically commented on the use of inappropriate costume, jewellery and footwear in period plays.

When candidates wear a long dress, they need to be taught how to wear it, walk in it and manage it, so that it looks a natural item of clothing.

Repetition of scenes

Repetitious scenes directed in the same way do not help candidates perform to the best of their ability. VAs have said that there are instances where whole centres have used the same prescribed text scenes, directed exactly the same way, for the entire cohort.

Use of props

If candidates are using props it is important they are familiar with them. This particularly pertains to comedy of manners, where candidates often have to be taught eg how to hold a cup and saucer. If female candidates use a fan, as some do in *The House of Bernarda Alba*, they need to be taught how to use it. Other issues include the use of a parasol and gloves. All of these items require practice so that use of them appears natural.

Use of accents

There are certain texts which benefit from use of accents, and normally centres choose well.

The Importance of Being Earnest, being a comedy of manners, deals with the *mores* of upper-class Victorian society, and this makes it important that the main characters use RP accents. If they do not, it fails to fulfil the writer's intention, which is to satirise the upper classes.

Antigone, *Twelfth Night*, *Ghosts*, *Mother Courage*, and *The House of Bernarda Alba* are all plays where clear English is acceptable. These plays do not require specific accents, though the difference in status in certain characters has to be obvious.

A Taste of Honey benefits from having the accent defined before the performance. It was written in Northern English.

The Birthday Party lends itself to McCann being Irish because of the way the lines are written, though it could be argued that a Scots accent is also acceptable.

Lovers is set in Northern Ireland, and the text revolves around that fact. It cannot be set elsewhere because of the strong role of the Catholic Church at that time, so the characters should use Irish accents.

Cross-gender roles

Candidates should only play a different gender in one character.

Some centres have taken to defining McCann and Goldberg as women and, while this type of casting has been accepted and can work well, it should be remembered that they are men.

Use of cameos

A range of cameo parts are being increasingly used, particularly in *Passing Places*. The Acting exam advises that candidates play one CST role. If a range of characters are presented — from Binks, to the Lollipop Lady, to the wee boy — the VA will mark the largest role.

No VA wants to ask a candidate to perform an acting piece twice because it is not long enough. As a result, it is never a good idea to cast Betty in the bed as a character in *The Crucible* or use Mercy Lewis in Act 1 as neither offers enough scope.

Length of Acting pieces

Some of these are too short and some are too long. If a piece is too long, it can disadvantage a candidate as well as one which is too short. A good indication is that the piece should last about seven to ten minutes for two candidates.

Audience

It is the responsibility of each centre to arrange a suitable audience for their Acting exam. The Acting component is worth 50% of the total marks, and a supportive audience can make all the difference to the way candidates perform.

General advice on the paper

Reading the question

It would be helpful if centres advised candidates to underline key words in a question. This ensures they read the whole question. Some lost marks this year in Section A by not referring to the **audience** in question 1, by not reading how you would **work with your actors** in question 2, by not reading **visual and aural** in question 3, and by not reading **more than one scene** in question 4.

Numbering the questions

Candidates should indicate the question they are answering by showing the number.

Technical

Candidates must mark the technical requirements on their script.

Use of quotation

Some candidates are careless with their use of quotation. Sometimes these are made up, and in some cases quotations are getting shorter and shorter so that they lack credibility and are barely valid at all. Quotations must be contextualised, and should be used to back up points made. Section A is The Study of a Text in its Theatrical Context. To answer a question adequately it is necessary to use textual exemplification to justify the points made.

Correlation between Sections A and B

There has to be correlation between Section A and Section B of the paper, eg we cannot have an end-on stage in Section A followed by a theatre in the round set for Section B.

Justification

It is important to justify why points are being made in an essay. A list of bullet points is not enough.

Use of one-act plays

One-act plays should only be used in conjunction with two other full-length plays.

Statistical information: update on Courses

Number of resulted entries in 2013	2638
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Number of resulted entries in 2014	2856
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Statistical information: Performance of candidates

Distribution of Course awards including grade boundaries

Distribution of Course awards	%	Cum. %	Number of candidates	Lowest mark
Maximum Mark 100				
A	24.9%	24.9%	711	70
B	37.9%	62.8%	1082	57
C	26.4%	89.2%	754	45
D	6.4%	95.6%	183	39
No award	4.4%	-	126	-

General commentary on grade boundaries

- ◆ While SQA aims to set examinations and create marking instructions which will allow a competent candidate to score a minimum of 50% of the available marks (the notional C boundary) and a well prepared, very competent candidate to score at least 70% of the available marks (the notional A boundary), it is very challenging to get the standard on target every year, in every subject at every level.
- ◆ Each year, SQA therefore holds a grade boundary meeting for each subject at each level where it brings together all the information available (statistical and judgemental). The Principal Assessor and SQA Qualifications Manager meet with the relevant SQA Business Manager and Statistician to discuss the evidence and make decisions. The meetings are chaired by members of the management team at SQA.
- ◆ The grade boundaries can be adjusted downwards if there is evidence that the exam is more challenging than usual, allowing the pass rate to be unaffected by this circumstance.
- ◆ The grade boundaries can be adjusted upwards if there is evidence that the exam is less challenging than usual, allowing the pass rate to be unaffected by this circumstance.
- ◆ Where standards are comparable to previous years, similar grade boundaries are maintained.
- ◆ An exam paper at a particular level in a subject in one year tends to have a marginally different set of grade boundaries from exam papers in that subject at that level in other years. This is because the particular questions, and the mix of questions, are different. This is also the case for exams set in centres. If SQA has already altered a boundary in a particular year in, say, Higher Chemistry, this does not mean that centres should necessarily alter boundaries in their prelim exam in Higher Chemistry. The two are not that closely related, as they do not contain identical questions.
- ◆ SQA's main aim is to be fair to candidates across all subjects and all levels and maintain comparable standards across the years, even as arrangements evolve and change.