



External Assessment Report 2011

Subject	Drama
Level	Higher

The statistics used in this report are pre-appeal.

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 number of candidates opting for the Higher Drama Course this year remained similar to last year.

Overall, marks awarded have improved on the 2010 examination with the average score for the Question Paper exam at 24.6 marks out of 50 — a 1.8 increase from last year. The average mark for the Acting exam is 36 out of 50 (an increase of 0.7 marks). This was most encouraging for both components of the external exam.

The A–C pass rate has improved from last year with 93.4% of candidates passing the exam.

The Crucible still remains the most popular of the prescribed texts, although *Antigone*, *Twelfth Night*, *Ghosts*, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *Mother Courage*, *The House of Bernarda Alba*, *A Taste of Honey*, *The Birthday Party* and *Lovers* are also presented, which is most encouraging.

Few centres use the Contemporary Scottish Theatre (CST) text for Dramatic Commentary.

The Acting examination

Candidates scored well in the Acting exam with an average mark of 36 out of 50. The assessment procedures worked well in nearly all instances and Visiting Assessors (VAs) commented on the quality of the acting and reported that candidates who chose fresh, new, interesting texts with challenging characters benefited from this.

Areas where the Acting examination could be improved

Many of these points have been made in previous reports but have been brought up again this year by Visiting Assessors.

It is helpful for candidates to use appropriate props and costume to help the credibility of a role rather than miming, eg eating or pouring.

Centres should try to avoid candidates reading in for one another. In the Acting exam, which is worth 50% of the total mark, it is helpful if class members learn lines to support each other and to ensure character interaction.

A number of candidates have shown that they are not familiar enough with the scripts and forget their lines. Some pupils cannot take the prompt and sustain their role. In the external exam this is not acceptable, and can be easily avoided with adequate rehearsal time.

Visiting Assessors commented that it is not helpful for centres to repeat the same scenes. VAs commented that some centres repeated the same scene up to five and six times with the same blocking, same movement, same vocal direction and same mannerisms. If the direction is the same, this is not helpful to candidates.

Repetition of the same scenes can also put a great strain on a solo male character who has to repeat the same scene on numerous occasions. This also means that it is very difficult to create a range of different interpretations of characters.

It is helpful for candidates to perform characters which suit their abilities rather than basing their choice on the text being studied. There is a wide range of prescribed texts from which to choose, and it should not be necessary for candidates to be given pieces where they are clearly uncomfortable. Playing a piece of opposite gender should now be a matter of choice. With the range of texts available, it should not be necessary for this to occur unless a candidate opts to do so.

It is important that candidates perform pieces of sufficient length to give them the opportunity to explore the characters effectively. No Visiting Assessor wants to ask a candidate to perform an extract twice, as it can throw their confidence, even if it is sensitively approached, eg the part of Mercy Lewis in Act 1 (pages 14–16) of *The Crucible* does not offer enough scope for the candidate to acquit herself well and this has been stated in previous reports.

The Acting exam is a formal examination. Audiences are essential for the exam and any audience should be briefed on what is expected of them. Mobile phones must be switched off. The audience should be of an age and stage appropriate for the extracts shown. This is a formal requirement and Visiting Assessors do not want to have to ask for an audience on the day as this must be organised in advance. VAs can refuse to proceed if there is no audience or when an audience is behaving inappropriately. It is also important that the Visiting Assessor is given enough physical space away from the audience to do their job effectively.

The use of accents appears to be an ongoing issue on which Visiting Assessors regularly report:

- ◆ *The Importance of Being Earnest* deals with the mores of upper class Victorian society. As a result, the main characters must use RP accents. If they do not, the play ceases to fulfil the writer's intention, which is to satirise upper class Victorian society.
- ◆ *Lovers* is set in Northern Ireland in the 1960s. There is nowhere else in the country which experienced the same problems as Ireland did at that time. As a result it is essential to use Irish accents for these plays. It is not appropriate to relocate the play to Scotland. Scotland did not experience the same problems.
- ◆ *Antigone*, *Twelfth Night*, *Ghosts*, *Mother Courage*, *The House of Bernarda Alba*, *The Crucible* and *Waiting for Godot* are plays where clear English is acceptable. These plays do not need to have a specific accent though some centres may choose to use RP accents for some characters in *Antigone* or *Twelfth Night*. Some centres choose to play McCann in *The Birthday Party* with an Irish accent, though others could argue a Scots accent is acceptable. Some centres choose to play *A Taste of Honey* with northern English accents whereas other centres feel that this is not necessary. However, if the accent affects the playwright's intention, it is essential to make the appropriate choice.

Some large centres have chosen to perform all Prescribed Text acting pieces one day and all CST pieces the following day. A Visiting Assessor needs to see the candidate acting

contrasting pieces and so it is advised that centres organise the exam event to be able to show each candidate acting both pieces within the same exam day.

Antigone is a text which originally would have been performed in a declamatory manner. For candidates to be directed to do that now is actually disadvantageous as it means that they show no character interaction. It is also difficult for candidates if they choose to use the Niobe speech from *Antigone* as the piece will be performed to chorus and then audience so, again, we see very little character interaction.

The missing scene from *The Crucible* is not acceptable as an acting piece for the set text part of the exam.

The wide range of new CST texts is being used by centres and this was commended by Visiting Assessors.

Section B of the Question Paper

Candidates performed well in the Dramatic Commentary section of the Question Paper where they showed a sound knowledge of stagecraft. Many centres now advise candidates to do the Dramatic Commentary first which seems to improve the confidence of candidates for the rest of the exam.

Areas where Section B could be improved

A large number of candidates still lose marks through careless ground plans. This could be easily rectified if candidates followed the anagram ACE OK:

audience, clear¹, entrances and exits, opening positions and a key.

If candidates are studying a text they should know who is in the extract. Candidates studying *Antigone* should know to add a chorus. Candidates studying *Winners* should know to have two commentators on set.

A large number of candidates lose marks on the technical effects column and this can be easily rectified. We ask for an opening and closing lighting state which means that, unless we have the opening scene of a play, we start with lights up. This needs to have the intensity of the light on a range of 1–10, the colour of the light, and justification of why it is as described. We also need a closing state — which is seldom the end of a scene — so usually the lights are still on. Some candidates also give a sound cue and justify it.

In the Dramatic Commentary it is essential to use stage terminology. Many candidates only scored out of 4 in the first column because of this. Equally, it is important for candidates to give direction on voice.

¹ For example, it is not appropriate to include enormous tables in the middle of a bedroom beside a tiny bed.

Areas which candidates found demanding

There was a marked improvement in the way candidates approached essay writing this year. On the whole, prescribed text essays still score better than those of Contemporary Scottish Theatre which are still often pre-prepared, and try to fit last year's questions into this year's templates. Some candidates still do not answer the question posed but there is, nevertheless, an overall improvement.

Introductions to essays are often long and have no relevance to the question asked. Too many candidates are still not using the language of the question to help focus their minds on what is being asked.

A large number of candidates still answer questions by being anecdotal and use no quotations. Quotations are essential to a good answer. Candidates need to **make** a point, **explain** the point and give a **quote** to justify the point made — (MEG).

Since the 2010 Higher Drama Understanding Standards Event, many more centres are using the MEG rule and the level of essay writing has generally improved — particularly in prescribed text essays.

The most important piece of advice is still that candidates should read carefully the question asked and not make up the one they want to answer.

Section A

Question 1

As a director of you prescribed text, to what extent would you have new ideas for staging and design concepts in your production?
Explain and justify your choices.

To answer this question, it was important to explain what the original production was like in order to refer back to it to explain new ideas. Many candidates only talked about their own ideas and so did not score high marks.

The question lent itself well to *Antigone* and *Twelfth Night* and many who studied these plays performed well in this question.

Question 2

Identify and describe importance of one or two minor characters from your prescribed text. Give reasons for your choice. As a director how would you help your actors prepare for performance?

It was decided to accept most characters so that candidates would not be disadvantaged but the range of minor characters discussed sometimes stretched the imagination. Often candidates did not answer in enough detail in the first part of the question and did not address the whole play.

The second half of this question was answered poorly showing that candidates are still not clear on a range of rehearsal techniques and their usefulness.

Question 3

As a director, describe the dramatic impact you would wish to create in the final scene of your prescribed text. Explain how your direction of the final scene would lead to this desired dramatic impact.

On the whole this question was not answered well as too many candidates did not have a clear idea of the role of the director. However, those who did have a clear idea scored well.

Question 4

Choose a character in your prescribed text that you would consider being essential to the plot and the themes and/or issues raised in the play. Give reasons for your choice. As an actor how would you perform the complexities of this role?

This was by far the most popular question and was done relatively well by a large number of candidates. Some candidates only referred to their acting piece and did not speak about the rest of the play and, as a result, they disadvantaged themselves.

Other candidates responded to the second half of the question by providing a series of rehearsal techniques when the question asked how — as an actor — the role would be performed.

Section C

Contemporary Scottish Theatre

The most popular text this year was *Black Watch*, followed by *Men Should Weep* and *Tally's Blood*. Other centres looked at *Passing Places*, *Britannia Rules*, *Perfect Days*, *The Steamie*, *Iron*, *The House of Bernarda Alba*, *Sunset Song*, *Bondagers*, *When I was a Girl I used to Scream and Shout*, *Dead Dad Dog*, *The Slab Boys*, *Medea*, *Yellow Moon*, *Gagarin Way*, *The Cheviot and the Stag*, *Damascus*, *The Sash*, *Deckie does a Bronco* and *Jean Brodie*.

Encouragingly, most schools using *The Letterbox* used it appropriately as a third text.

Question 6

With reference to at least two or more Contemporary Scottish plays that you have seen or read, comment on 'life in the city' and/or 'life in rural Scotland'.

A large number of candidates attempted this question and many approached it well, but a minority of centres did not seem to think it necessary to make use of quotations and candidates scored low marks.

Question 7

In your opinion, what religious and /or political issues most concern Scottish playwrights? You should illustrate your answer with two or more plays you have seen or read.

Many candidates answering this question got mixed up between political and social issues. The social question was quite clearly Question 6. Marks were given where possible, and many candidates used *Black Watch* effectively for this question.

Question 8

Comment on the use of comedy techniques, comic characterisations and the use of comic language in two or more plays you have seen or read.

Very few candidates addressed this question.

Question 9

Discuss the appeal of history and/or social history for Scottish audiences. You should illustrate your answer with reference to two or more plays you have seen or read.

Some candidates confused nostalgia with history showing that they had pre-prepared their answers. Few candidates answered this question.

Question 10

Discuss the extent to which Scottish playwrights present a negative portrayal of women and womanhood. You should illustrate your answer with reference to two or more plays you have seen or read.

This question was answered very well by some candidates, though others completely missed the point and chose inappropriate texts to exemplify the points they were trying to make. Some answered this from a male perspective, which led to a confused response. Others chose to answer this as powerful women who are not always negative and some talked about their negative portrayal by men or the negative conditions in which they live.

Question 11

'The younger generation of men and women have greater equality compared to previous generations.'

Do you agree with this view? You should illustrate your answer with reference to two or more plays that you have seen or read.

This question was generally well done and was attempted by a large number of candidates. Others misinterpreted what was asked or did not appear to take the time to read the question properly to work out what was being asked.

Question 12

Describe and analyse one live performance that you have seen performed by a contemporary Scottish theatre company in the past two years.

There was a significant increase in the number of candidates who approached this question and many answered it very well indeed, influenced by the National Theatre of Scotland's revival of *Black Watch*. Some candidates recycled prepared answers but many were caught up in their enthusiasm for the production and their answers were a joy to read.

Question 13

Consider the work of one contemporary Scottish playwright. To what extent does this playwright create complex characterisations or merely present two-dimensional ones? You should illustrate your answer with reference to two or more plays that you have seen or read.

Very few candidates attempted this question.

Advice to centres for preparation of future candidates

General

It is unnecessary for candidates to write out the question in full in the exam as this wastes valuable time.

It would be most beneficial for candidates to read the question slowly and thoroughly and then underline the key words to help them focus on their answer.

Too many candidates like to tell the story of their prescribed text, some writing several pages before they even began to address the question asked.

Some centres show the films of texts which is leading to confusion when candidates are answering questions, as the chronology, set and additional characters do not always link to the play text.

Many candidates show little in-depth analysis in their answers and just make lists; essay writing is a skill which requires to be practised.

Pre-prepared answers do not work; candidates must learn to answer the question asked.

Some answers were too short and did not have the scope to deal with what was asked.

It is important that candidates write the number of the question they are answering at the top of their answer. On a number of occasions markers had to work out which question was being answered.

Statistical information: update on Courses

Number of resulted entries in 2010	2,446
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Number of resulted entries in 2011	2,456
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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	21.1%	21.1%	518	70
B	39.2%	60.3%	963	57
C	27.4%	87.7%	673	45
D	5.7%	93.4%	141	39
No award	6.6%	100.0%	161	-

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, therefore, SQA 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 Head of Service 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.