



External Assessment Report 2009

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

There was a slight increase in entries for Higher Drama in 2009 which was encouraging. There were no changes to the course structure, but there was a change in the weighting in that the two external components now have equal weighting. The feedback from the teaching profession has been very positive about the new 50:50 split.

The Crucible still remains the most popular choice of prescribed text but, encouragingly, there is now more variety of texts used than in previous years. *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 all being used. This is encouraging, as it suggests centres are more inclined to choose a text to suit the range and make up of the group rather than opt for the same text year after year.

Although *Waiting for Godot* is not often studied as a prescribed text, it remains a popular acting choice.

It is also positive to see that centres are also more inclined to suit acting pieces to candidates and we see fewer candidates playing roles of opposite gender which is always challenging.

Few centres use the CST text for the Dramatic Commentary.

Areas in which candidates performed well

Candidates continue to perform very well in the practical/acting component of the course. They are well prepared on the whole, and centres are well organised. Visiting Examiners felt that centres enjoyed showcasing their candidates and, in some instances, centres asked SQA for permission to perform in the evening to ensure an appropriate, encouraging audience for their candidates.

Visiting Examiners praised the excellent performances they saw and commented on the welcome they received from the majority of centres. It is the great enthusiasm of both staff and students for the subject and, for that, everyone taking part in the examination should be commended.

Candidates also performed well in Section B of the Question Paper - the Dramatic Commentary. Here, the majority of centres showed that their students had a sound grasp of stagecraft.

Advice to centres for preparation of future candidates in the Acting exam

- ◆ Character descriptions should be filled in at the back of the Acting Mark Sheets. Despite numerous reminders in some instances, this often still does not happen and puts the Visiting Examiner at a disadvantage, as the candidate's concept is unknown. Visiting Examiners can ask the candidate to talk to their interpretation before the performance, but many choose not to do this as it unnerves candidates. Visiting Examiners, like teaching staff, want candidates to be able to show and fulfil their true potential under examination conditions.
- ◆ Acting is an area where candidates excel, but it is not in the interests of the candidates to repeat the same scene using the same direction for a range of candidates. Acting pieces are always more effective if they are chosen to suit the candidate concerned.
- ◆ The plays chosen should always offer characterisation opportunities or candidates will be severely disadvantaged. Visiting Examiners felt that some scenes did not offer opportunities to show enough in-depth characterisation. One such scene used was in *The Crucible* Act 1, pages 14-16, where is not enough scope for Mercy Lewis or Mary Warren to acquit themselves well.
- ◆ This year some centres cast very able candidates in pieces which were, in effect, monologues. They fulfilled the criteria by having another character present on stage. This did not show character interaction and potentially severely disadvantaged candidates.
- ◆ If a candidate uses a text they have not studied as an acting piece, it is important that they do enough research into the character to produce a convincing portrayal.
- ◆ This year a number of Visiting Examiners commented about the way prompts are given and taken. A number of candidates came out of character to ask for lines. This needs to be addressed by the centre in a way which suits them best. Some staff direct students to know that if a line is lost, they improvise a way out. This can put the candidate under pressure but, as often as not, they are so used to knowing they will not get a line they ensure they are word perfect.
- ◆ It is important to give Visiting Examiners space to mark. A number complained about the close proximity of staff and pupils. Some Visiting Examiners reported that they were asked to divulge marks and they had to reiterate SQA policy on this matter. Component marks continue to be released by SQA and sent to all centres at certification time each year.
- ◆ Costume can pose a problem if it is not appropriate. Blacks and practice skirts are acceptable throughout if a centre does not want to go to the trouble of costuming in period.
- ◆ Audiences can pose a continuity problem where they are there to watch half of an exam and then have to leave. They can also pose a suitability problem. At times the content of Contemporary Scottish Theatre (CST) may be inappropriate for a younger audience. Centres should ensure they do not disadvantage candidates by having an inappropriate audience in place and should consider and address these issues in advance of the Acting examination.
- ◆ It is disadvantageous for candidates who are being assessed for acting if their partner, who is not being assessed, is still on the book. It makes interaction very difficult.

Areas which candidates found demanding

General Points

Ground Plans are still lacking in accuracy and because candidates continue to make careless mistakes, some scored two marks where it would have been very straightforward to score four: the same is true for the technical column of the Dramatic Commentary.

Candidates can find essay writing a difficult skill. Prescribed text answers are better than those on CST on the whole, but many candidates still pre-prepare answers and try to shoehorn prepared responses into a question.

Introductions to essay responses are often as much as a page long and often tell the story of the play. This is time consuming and no marks are awarded for this.

The majority of candidates are still not addressing the question asked, or they are using the language of the question to help focus their minds on what is being asked. Many candidates are using a poor range of quotations to justify responses.

A large number of candidates answering on *The Crucible* portray Abigail as someone who wears a red petticoat, is lit by a red profile spot, carries a red handkerchief or wears a red flower in her hair. This is inappropriate and should not be encouraged.

Question Paper: Section A

Question 1

Explain the dramatic purpose of who you consider to be the main character in your prescribed text. As an actor describe how this would influence your performance of this character.

Candidates frequently did not address the meaning of *dramatic purpose*. This is something with which all candidates are familiar, otherwise they would not score so highly in the Acting exam. There needs to be more joined up thinking between what candidates do in practical terms and how candidates think and write. The external examination tests what they know and understand.

Question 2

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

Some candidates did not refer to *dramatic impact*. Again this is something they regularly create when they are acting. However this was the question which was the most popular, and the one in which candidates achieved the highest marks.

Sometimes candidates did not identify a scene and just described the action of the play. It is very important that they read the question asked.

Question 3

You have been asked to design a set of your production for the National Theatre of Scotland. The production will be presented in large proscenium arch theatres throughout the country. Explain and justify your staging and design concepts.

The design question was not answered well. Most candidates did not even refer to a large proscenium arch theatre. Again, this is the type of theatre with which they are most familiar. They know what needs to be addressed in such theatres because that is where they would regularly attend.

Question 4

Identify two contrasting characters from your prescribed text. Give reasons for your choice. As a director, how would you help your actors to develop these two roles in rehearsals?

This is what most candidates did for their Acting exam. They played one character and their partner played a contrasting character. They then developed these roles in rehearsal.

However, most candidates attempting this question ignored the second part and answered it as if it was for performance. Again, this is about addressing the question asked. Candidates are all familiar with the rehearsal process. They all do it, but most ignored it and made up their own question and answered this and, in so doing, severely disadvantaged themselves.

Question Paper: Section B – Dramatic Commentary

Question 5

On the whole this was well done.

Question Paper: Section C – Contemporary Scottish Theatre Social Political and Religious Dimensions

Question 6

*'Contemporary Scottish plays highlight the need for political and/or social change'.
With reference to two or more plays you have studied or seen, discuss the political and/or social changes that Scottish playwrights want us to consider.*

The majority of candidates attempting this question did not answer it. Instead, they listed a number of social issues and did not address what was asked.

Question 7

*'Scottish plays focus on a negative image of Scots and/or Scotland.' Do you agree with this view?
You should illustrate your answer with reference to two or more plays you have seen or read.*

Candidates answered this question reasonably well because in most cases they tried to address what was being asked.

Use of History, Nostalgia and Popular Tradition

Question 8

Can you account for the success of Scottish plays, which deal with history or social history? You should illustrate answer with reference to two or more plays you have seen or read.

Very few candidates answered this question but, of those who did, a high proportion mixed up history with nostalgia.

Question 9

'Contemporary Scottish playwrights rely heavily on popular traditional stage techniques, at the expense of character development.'

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

Most candidates answering this question looked at the first part and gave lists of popular tradition techniques. They then went on to ignore the second part or make a cursory reference to it. Many also used this question to answer on nostalgia and so scored low marks.

Issues of Gender

Question 10

Discuss the relationships between women in Contemporary Scottish plays. You should illustrate your answer with reference to two or more plays you have seen or read.

This was a popular question but many did not read the question and wrote about the relationships of women rather than relationships *between* women. Others wrote about how women are regarded by men in CST.

Question 11

Are there any unconventional men in contemporary Scottish drama? You should illustrate your answer with reference to two or more plays you have seen or read.

In this question, candidates did not address what *unconventional* meant. It was changed to *weak*, and often pre-prepared answers were given.

Current Productions and Issues

Question 12

Describe and analyse a performance by a Scottish Regional Company or the National Theatre of Scotland.

Not many candidates answered this question which is unfortunate as the question has the potential for successful responses from many candidates.

Question 13

Consider the work of one contemporary Scottish playwright. To what extent does this playwright focus on Scottish issues? You should illustrate your answer with reference to two or more plays you have seen or read.

A small number of candidates answered this question.

Advice to centres for preparation of future candidates

The Question Paper

It is vital that candidates read the Question Paper carefully. This may seem very obvious advice but so many candidates latch on to one word in a question and then start writing what they think is being asked rather than what is being asked.

There are certain key words in every question. It would be helpful if candidates underlined these and then wrote their essay plan keeping these key words in mind.

It is helpful if candidates use words in their essay responses which replicate the question; this helps them focus their thoughts.

The Letter Box, Saturday Night at the Commodore, One Good Beating, and Quelques Fleurs are not full length texts and should only be used as back up material.

Texts used should offer candidates enough scope to be able to answer questions on characters and issues.

It is a good idea to encourage candidates to look at the final section of the paper on Current Productions. There may well be a question there which suits them very well.

Some candidates seem very muddled about the section on history, nostalgia and popular tradition, in that some confuse nostalgia with popular tradition, thinking they are one and the same thing.

Statistical information: update on Courses

Number of resulted entries in 2008	2138
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Number of resulted entries in 2009	2301
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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	15.7%	15.7%	361	70
B	40.3%	56.0%	927	57
C	30.9%	86.9%	712	45
D	6.8%	93.7%	157	39
No award	6.3%	100.0%	144	-

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.