



Set Text Guide: That Face

AS and A Level Drama and Theatre

Pearson Edexcel Level 3 Advanced GCE in Drama and Theatre (9DR0)

**Pearson Edexcel Level 3 Advanced Subsidiary GCE in
Drama and Theatre (9DR0)**

GCE Drama 2016: That Face

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Characters

Martha

The subject matter of the play. She is unable to look after herself or her children and refuses to seek professional help. Martha struggles with addiction and is heavily medicated to deal with the various sides of her personality. Martha is the mother of Henry and Mia and both children refer to her by her name. This is one of the many unusual aspects of the relationship she has with her children. Martha spends the majority of the play in her son's bed and displays a range of emotions throughout the play. The audience are provided with glimpses of her maternal capacity by the majority of the play involving her being spoilt, childish, immature and spiteful. It is only in the final scene of the play, when she realises the destruction she has caused, that the audience become aware of her capacity to change. Martha has clearly not dealt well with the break-up of her marriage and as a result she has used both alcohol and prescription drugs as a coping strategy. She treats her son, Henry, almost like a toy – a soldier, a doll, a playmate. The dynamic in their relationship is unhealthy and provides much of the controversy surrounding the subject matter.

Mia

Mia is 15 years old. She has recently been threatened with expulsion from school after taking part in a brutal initiation activity with her friend, Izzy. Mia is a troubled and confused 'wild child' who has a vicious and negative relationship with her mother. As a result she leads an unhealthy and adult lifestyle that seems to rob her of her childhood innocence. Mia smokes and drinks and often gains unsupervised access to her father's Docklands flat. Mia adores her older brother, Henry. He is the only constant in her life and therefore emotions run high when she thinks she has upset him or betrayed his confidence. Despite her reckless behaviour she shows signs of great maturity and often plays go-between for her mother, father and brother. She is frequently put in difficult situations and is clearly a victim of her dysfunctional upbringing.

Henry

Henry is an aspiring artist but has dropped out of school to care for his mother. It is not entirely clear how long this situation has been going on but is it long enough for the audience to appreciate that this has become the 'norm'. His heart is in the right place, but Henry fails to have the emotional maturity to deal with the severity of the situation with which he is faced. As a result, he is manipulated and emotionally blackmailed by his mother. His guilt and desire to 'fix' her problems create an unusual and unhealthy dynamic which will no doubt make audiences feel uncomfortable. Henry sleeps with Izzy. Henry has total contempt for his father and blames his mother's psychological state on the fact that he abandoned the family. There are moments in the play when Henry is both the bully and the victim.

Hugh

The ex-husband of Martha and father to Mia and Henry. He lives in Hong Kong with his new wife and baby. He is a broker and frequently talks about money. Money is the answer to his problems; he bribes Mia's school in order for her to avoid expulsion, and offers to pay for Martha to attend a private clinic. He pays little attention to his family, and therefore his approach to parenting is unwelcomed by Martha, Mia and Henry. It is implied that Martha's destruction and psychological demise are a result of the marriage breakdown.

Izzy

Izzy is 16 years old. She goes to school with Mia and is responsible for the initiation ritual that is performed on Alice. Izzy comes from a similar socio-economic background to Mia, and spends the majority of her time either at boarding school or unsupervised. She is another wild child and behaves in a reckless and selfish manner. Izzy sleeps with Henry and this causes tension between her and Mia.

Alice

Alice is a 13-year-old schoolgirl who is the victim of a cruel and violent initiation rite. She is drugged and tied up and as a result ends up with severe injuries in hospital. She says very little in the play and her consciousness in the play is unclear, particularly in the hospital scene. Her function in the play is to reinforce the wildness of Izzy and Mia's behaviour. Alice, like her peers, is from an affluent background, as her private hospital room suggests.

Summary

Scene 1

Sunday evening in the dorm of a private boarding school.

The stage directions help to set the scene, and it soon becomes apparent that Alice, a 13-year-old student at the school, is 'mid-initiation'. She has been tied to a chair by two other students from the school: Mia (15 years old) and Izzy (16 years old). Alice does not speak in the scene as she has been heavily sedated by the girls. The language and style of the scene is rooted in black comedy, and throughout there is a sense of danger and panic as the two girls in charge gradually lose control and consider several worse-case scenarios.

SCENE 2

Monday morning. Henry's bedroom.

Once again the detailed stage directions help to set the scene. Henry is asleep in his bed. His mother, Martha is also asleep on the bed. Martha's actions are detailed in the stage direction and involve her smoking, bringing in coffee and stroking her son. It is clear from the range of activity and detail provided that this is a naturalistic play and the audience are to assume the play takes place in a reduced version of 'real time'.

It is evident in the opening dialogue between Henry and Martha that they have a strange and unconventional relationship as mother and son. They have argued the night before, and it is made clear to the audience that this is a regular feature of their relationship. Martha hyperventilates as a result of her emerging panic and melodramatic behaviour. As things calm down, the dialogue continues and Henry starts to sketch.

Mia arrives at the house. It is clear there is tension between Martha and Mia. Henry acts as mediator and assumes the role of the adult in the scene. Mia has come to collect the keys to the Docklands flat that belongs to their father. Mia has been expelled from school as a result of the initiation. The school have informed Martha, but she cannot remember the conversation as she was drunk. Consequently the school have informed Mia and Henry's father, Hugh. He is on his way over from Hong Kong to deal with the matter. The news upsets Martha. Mia hands back the Valium that she stole from her mother. When Henry and Mia are alone, she explains the situation with school and informs the audience that Alice is now in hospital as a result of the initiation. Henry persuades Mia to visit the hospital in an attempt to make amends. Mia persuades Henry to come with her and they leave the flat together.

Scene 3

Later that same day in a private hospital room.

Alice is the patient and it is not clear whether she is asleep or sedated. Mia and Henry are in the room. Henry accuses Mia of being reckless and Mia attempts to defend her actions: 'It seemed perfectly fine – allowed, even.' Henry wants to leave and begins to panic at the thought of being caught in the room. He notices that the cups at the side of the bed are still warm. This escalates his concern. The tragedy of the situation is juxtaposed with black comedy and sarcasm. When they hear the sound of footsteps approaching the room they hide under the bed. Izzy enters the room. She pretends to comfort Alice but soon returns to her usual self when she realises Henry and Mia are in the room. She prods and pokes Alice. At the end of the scene the three of them have decided to leave and find somewhere to drink. Izzy is clearly attracted to Henry. The scene ends with Alice crying in the bed.

Scene 4

The next day, Tuesday. Martha's flat, Henry's bedroom.

The room is messy. Once again, the stage directions dominate the first few moments of the scene and Martha waits impatiently for Henry, who has returned home after a night out and heads straight for the shower. When Henry gets out of the shower he enters the room in only a towel and asks for his clean clothes. He is perplexed that he cannot find any of his clothes. Eventually he puts on Martha's robe. Henry has scratches on his back and marks on his neck. Martha questions why, and for the first time in the play appears to talk like an adult: 'I'm your mother, not one of your ... mates.' Henry says he has stayed the night at a friend's, and Martha questions his sexuality. They begin to argue and the situation quickly explodes when Henry discovers that Martha has cut all his clothes into tiny pieces. Henry declares that he has spent the night with a girl and Martha acts like a jealous and spoilt child. She feels betrayed. The situation calms down and Martha asks to touch and look at his body. Just as the tone of the scene begins to calm down, Martha gives her son a love-bite on his neck.

Scene 5

Hugh's flat at Canary Wharf. The room is littered with the aftermath of a heavy night. Several beer cans, glasses and ashtrays are spread across the scene.

There are several props mentioned in the stage directions which reinforce the contemporary nature of this play. Mia enters the scene on the phone to her father, who has recently landed in the UK. Panic emerges as Mia soon realises the flat needs to be cleaned. Izzy enters the scene 'wrapped in a sheet'. It is apparent that she has spent the night with Henry. She is hungover. Mia is not pleased.

Henry has already left the flat, and it soon transpires that he has returned home to visit Martha. Izzy winds Mia up with details of the night she has spent with Henry. Henry enters the scene and is cold towards Izzy. Izzy leaves to get dressed and Mia begins to clean the flat. Henry soon orders Izzy to leave after she attempts to flirt with him.

The audience soon learn of the difficult relationship that Mia and Henry have with their father, and Henry in particular is resistant to his Dad's intervention: 'Daddio's on his way ... to save the day.' Mia and Henry discuss the care he has given to Martha over the last five years and they argue. Mia encourages Henry to leave his mother: 'If you left, Henry, it would settle, one way or another.' This statement adds fuel to the fire as the tension escalates.

Scene 6

Early evening of the same day. Martha's flat, Henry's room.

Martha is on the bed, drunk. She has an absurd conversation with the talking clock on her phone. Martha soon explodes and shouts at Sonia, the cleaner. However, it is not Sonia, it is Henry. He arrives holding flowers. The conversation is awkward and tense and Martha pretends to not know Henry. She explains: 'I did have a son, called Harry, actually. Well, he died, about five hours ago.' Martha presents a mock ceremony and discusses her pain at losing her son. Again the seriousness and sadness of the situation are presented through black comedy. Communication between the two is tense. Henry offers to get Martha food as she sprinkles the flowers over the bed. Henry returns with a can of cat food and is disturbed at the thought that Martha has eaten the contents. She has not. Henry informs Martha that Hugh is on his way over. Henry asks his mother to check in to a clinic to help her recover. Martha only agrees to his request if he stays and has a drink with her. The scene is riddled with emotional blackmail.

Scene 7

The same evening.

Mia and Hugh are in a restaurant together: *'They sit in silence for some moments.'* It is clear throughout the scene that there is tension between the two. Neither really knows how to communicate with the other. The opening of the scene is dominated with small talk. It becomes apparent that Hugh has visited Mia's school and persuaded the headteacher not to expel Mia. Hugh has offered the school a 'few new digital cameras' by way of an apology/bribe. This is a clear example of the way in which Hugh attempts to solve problems: with money.

Mia drinks wine with her father. Hugh believes that Henry is still in school, although the audience have learnt previously that he has dropped out to pursue his artistic aspirations. Hugh invites Mia out to Hong Kong to meet her baby sister. Each time Hugh attempts to talk about something serious, Mia distracts and changes topic. Hugh asks Mia to tell him everything about Martha. This clearly puts Mia in a difficult situation. Hugh wants to put Martha in a clinic: *'Clean her up a bit.'*

Scene 8

The next day. Martha's flat. Henry's room.

The longest scene in the text and the dramatic climax of the play. Henry and Martha appear to have been up all night and still show the signs of their alcohol consumption. The scene begins with Martha dressing up Henry in various articles of her clothes/jewellery: *'He glitters. Look at how he glitters.'* Henry is trying to dress Martha in attempt to get her ready to leave. The dialogue is tragically funny. The door buzzes and Mia and Hugh enter. Hugh makes several comments about Henry's attire.

Henry and Mia leave the room to make coffee for Martha. Martha makes racist remarks about Hugh's new wife. Hugh makes several comments about the state of the room. Hugh informs Martha that he intends to take her to the 'Cromwell', a private London hospital. He attempts to sympathise with her condition: *'You're not well.'* They share a slight tender moment, although Hugh is quick to reject her offer. Martha drags up various arguments from their past.

Henry re-enters the scene and jokes about happy families. Hugh instructs Henry to get dressed and leave for school. Henry reveals he has dropped out of school *'about a year and a half ago, actually.'* Hugh eventually loses control: *'what the hell is going on, because this has a nightmarish quality I don't like.'* Henry and Martha side together and gang up on Hugh and his attitude towards money. The tension increases and there is a slight physical altercation between Mia and Martha. Martha informs Mia and Henry that she called Hugh and asked for his help. This immediately fuels the situation and suddenly Hugh is held accountable by the other three: *'See him properly. Go on. See what he is.'* The attack on Hugh makes an unusual alliance between Martha and Mia, another example of how superficial their relationship is. Henry verbally attacks his father and explains that they do not need or want his help. Hugh doesn't want Mia to be part of this situation but she refuses to leave without her brother. Martha clings to Henry for support and the situation explodes. Henry shouts and screams at his father and wets himself. At this point the mood changes and Martha begins to act more appropriately. She comforts him and attempts to calm him down. Hugh states: *'You're a good boy – to bad parents'* and seems, for the first time, to acknowledge that he is also at fault. The scene ends with Martha agreeing to leave. Henry resorts to childish behaviour and loses all strength. The stage directions at the end of the scene outline the final moments of the play.

Social, cultural and historical context

That Face is Stenham's debut play. 'Powerfully guided by the Oedipus myth, but also by the middle-class milieu of boarding-school torture rituals, addiction clinics and business-class travel, Stenham initially wrote the play for the Royal Court's Young Writers Programme.' (*Telegraph*).

Stenham wrote the play when she was 19 years old, as part of the young writer's programme that is facilitated by the Royal Court Theatre. In 2007 the play won the TMA award for Best New Play, and starred Matt Smith in the role of Henry and Lindsay Duncan as Martha. The first production was directed by Jeremy Herrin and was presented at the Royal Court (Jerwood Theatre Upstairs). After much critical acclaim it transferred to the West End and was presented at the Duke of York's Theatre in 2008. In the same year Stenham was awarded the Critic's Circle Award for Most Promising Playwright.

In 2010 *That Face* was produced Off-Broadway at City Centre by the Manhattan Theater Club.

That Face received its first London revival in 2013 at The Landor Theatre.

Themes

Polly Stenham's dark and tragically comic play, *That Face*, is a contemporary drama that tells the tale of a **dysfunctional family** and the events that occur as a result of **conflict, negligence and divorce**.

The play explores a variety of modern issues such as **parenting, sex, safeguarding and abuse**, and despite its mature subject matter, students and teachers will find the content of this text both accessible and engaging.

Stenham's characters exist right on the edge of what is deemed socially appropriate and normal. Henry is forced to look after his mother and defend her **addiction**, and in return is comforted and confused by a mother who behaves more like a lover than a parent: 'You live in an upside down world, Martha.' The blurred lines of her character relationships present a range of psychologically damaged and lonely individuals who are all in desperate need of rescuing: 'This has a nightmarish quality that I don't like.'

In 2009 the play was listed as number 9 in the top 20 plays of the decade, and one of the reasons it might be considered such a powerful and important text for our generation is because it uses a small, domestic family setting to explore universal themes such as **family, class and education**. Stenham seems to suggest that many of the problems characters face in the play are symptomatic of their socio-economic circumstances. Mia and Izzy are left to their own devices, and it could be argued that is their lack of regular guidance and consistent support from their families that has resulted in such damaging and disturbing behaviour. Stenham paints the boarding school environment in equal colours of corruption as Hugh offers digital cameras by way of a bribe. **Money** plays a significant part in the play, but it soon becomes clear that no matter how much money Hugh attempts to throw at each issue, the one thing his family needs cannot be bought.

At several points in the play the bully is the victim and the victim is the bully. The characters are **damaged, fragile and brutal**. This is a play that explores complex and mature themes. Through a careful and sensitive approach, teachers and students will engage with the demands of this difficult subject matter.

Resources

Recommended edition

That Face by Polly Stenham

Faber and Faber edition: ISBN 978-0-571-24421-8

This is the recommended edition for the Pearson Specification

Further reading

The Royal Court Theatre by Ruth Little & Emily McLaughlin

ISBN: 978-1840027631

Rewriting the Nation: British Theatre Today by Aleks Sierz

ISBN 978-1408112380

Online resources

Polly Stenham on playwriting:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=NPWdwTNjOUU

Polly Stenham on the Royal Court:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=h_Kgr12vrvg

Trailer for West End production of *That Face*:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=p6cfxmS7ySI

Short documentary on the Royal Court:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=ngBkdPmq4LA

'A Middle-Class Play for Today' – *Telegraph* article:

www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/drama/3672972/That-Face-a-middle-class-play-for-today.html

Off-Broadway Review – *New York Times*:

www.nytimes.com/2010/05/19/theater/reviews/19that.html?_r=0

There is also a series of design-based tutorials offered by the National Theatre. These are available by visiting www.youtube.com/user/ntdiscovertheatre

Practical exploration activities

Actors

The following exercises are designed to help theatre makers practically explore some of the key characters, themes and ideas that are central to *That Face*. Some of the exercises may help actors to consider how key roles might be communicated and realised from 'page to stage'.

Off-text improvisation is a useful explorative technique to consider the 'before and after' life of the play. For example, a useful exercise would be to create a marriage guidance session that explores the reasons for the divorce between Martha and Hugh. It might also be useful to invent the unseen scene between Hugh and the headteacher of Mia's school.

Hot-seating is a valuable and exciting method to develop characterisation. It helps actors to 'flesh out' their understanding of the characters and provides them with the opportunity to develop ideas for performance. Characters should respond in role and consider the voice, attitude and physicality of the character they are exploring. For example, an actor assuming the role of Alice might wish to interrogate Mia and Izzy. As the play is naturalistic, each actor should carefully consider the given circumstances of each role. Each fact that is 'given' by Stenham will help structure the off-text exploratory work.

Improvisation guru Keith Johnstone uses a particularly useful status exercise entitled '**Bully/Victim/Mediator**'. In this exercise, three actors take on three different roles and assume the 'type' of bully, victim or mediator. This exercise can work both on-text and off-text. An off-text scenario might involve the day Hugh leaves the family, while an on-text scenario might involve the final scene. The objective of the exercise is to play the scene to type until a signal is given. Once that signal has been given, each actor should change status. For example, the bully may become the victim, the victim may become the mediator, and the mediator could become the bully. This is a useful exercise to explore status and character dynamic, and is particularly appropriate for this play as all characters take on different status types, depending on the scene and situation. A key question to ask when evaluating this exercise is – how did your use of voice, physicality and space change in each dynamic?

Exploring the use of voice can help actors to consider character choices. The play is set in London and the middle-class background and socio-economic status of the family would suggest that they might use an RP accent. You may want to explore other accents for the characters, but be sure your students can justify their reasons. It might be more appropriate for your students to take part in a voice workshop that explores vocal placement. Exploring where the voice is placed can help actors make specific emotional choices. For example, Martha's state of mind changes in every scene. How can an actor show this through the use of vocal placement? It might be effective to explore placing her voice in the head-voice to create a child-like quality, and then snap into an aggressive chest voice to show her emerging frustration. Does it make a difference if characters speak in a clipped, staccato and aggressive manner? What happens when the speech is slowed down? It might be interesting to explore the vocal quality of Mia and Izzy in the opening scene. Voice plays an important role in the development of tension, mood and atmosphere, and by exploring this idea in practice, your students will feel more confident documenting their ideas on paper.

Non-verbal communication is often a highly effective way to explore character, subtext, tension and silence. How does each character behave in moments of silence? There is a significant quantity of stage directions in this play, and much of the non-verbal detail is suggested by the playwright. Look again at Martha's behaviour in Scene 4. You might want to try exploring this action under different timed conditions. For example, what is theatrically communicated when the actor spends 5 whole minutes waiting for Henry to appear? Can this level of detail and intensity be recreated in 1 minute? Another potential moment to explore how non-verbal action can communicate ideas to an audience is the opening moments of Scene 7. Mia and Hugh sit awkwardly together in the restaurant, and much of this emotional tension could be explored and presented through the use of non-verbal communication.

Exploring the use of stage space can be another useful exercise for an actor to consider how proxemics can create meaning for an audience. Try staging a scene from the play in a variety of ways, and consider the theatrical impact on the audience. The play is naturalistic and is traditionally staged in a proscenium arch. However, what happens when the audience are placed closer to the action. Does it heighten the awkwardness and tension of a scene? Does it increase the sympathy of the audience? Try rehearsing the scenes in Henry's bedroom with an actual bed or raised platform. How does this constrain or free the actors to make different spatial and physical choices? Explore the moment in the restaurant between Mia and her father. How far apart are they? Does it make a difference? Try the scene with props, cutlery, wine glasses etc. Does this encourage the actors to make further choices? Try staging each scene in different ways so that students are able to practically consider the function of each key scene in the context of the play as a whole.

Designers

The following exercises and ideas are designed to help theatre makers explore some of the opportunities, themes and ideas that are central to *That Face*. Some of the suggestions may help designers to consider how key aspects of the play might be communicated and realised and from 'page to stage'.

It might be useful to set up a **production meeting** and pitch for your student designers, as this will help them to consider the play as a whole and root their practical ideas in aims and intentions. Remember that audience impact is key, and that setting up small groups of potential theatre makers might help your students to consider the text in a holistic way. For example, a group could consist of a set, costume, sound and lighting designer. Smaller groups simply take on more than one area of responsibility. It is important that each designer questions the aims and intentions of the others, so that each member of the team is able to think in a holistic and collaborative way. The design 'pitch' could then be offered to the teacher (producer!). This is a useful discussion exercise that also lends itself to research, images and presentations. It can work at the start of a scheme of work to initiate ideas/contextualise themes and key moments, or at the end of a scheme of work as a way of ensuring all aspects of production are considered. It would also make an excellent 'active' revision session in time for the exam. TIP – each member of the production team should justify their ideas with key moments from the play.

Creating a **model box of a potential set design** is a useful exercise and can be as simple or as elaborate as required. It is often useful for students to see how each scene will be played in a potential space, and by creating a model box they will be able to refer more easily to their ideas in a specific space. *That Face* refers to several different locations, and a model box design might help your students to consider how each space could be created on stage.

Exploring different music and sound effects for key scenes is another effective way of considering how design can play an important role in the development of a key idea or theme. Stenham uses five different locations in this play: the boarding school dorm, Henry's bedroom, the hospital room, the Docklands flat and the restaurant. How might a sound designer create each setting? It might be useful to try using these sounds in scene work to see if the sound adds to the overall mood and atmosphere of the scene. Sound and music can also be used to help transition from scene to scene. What would make an appropriate soundtrack for this play?

If you have access to **different lighting effects** it might be useful to explore key scenes in different lighting states. As previously mentioned, there are several different locations in the play, and lighting might help to create a sense of contrast. For example, how might lighting be used to create a sense of the boarding school dorm in Scene 1? Is it elaborate or minimal? What is the theatrical effect? What effect is created when the light is placed at different angles – uplighting, downlighting, sidelighting? How might lighting be used to create the restaurant setting? There are several references in the stage directions to the time of day. How can lighting be used to explore time in *That Face*? Have a look at previous productions and lighting designs to see how other theatre makers have used lighting to create impact in the play.

Another useful exercise that helps to build the world of the play and develop ideas for performance is **sourcing and designing potential costumes**. Research is key, and will help students who are initially daunted about the thought of 'designing'. They don't have to be great artists to create great designs. The main thing is that they approach the design of the production in a holistic way. How does their costume design help to reveal subtleties and details of character? What is their aim and intention? Does their costume design root the production and performance in a particular time period or style? How does the performance of an actor playing Henry change when he wears his mother's clothes in the final scene? It is interesting for designers to interview actors and discover how costume can reveal insight into characterisation and interpretation.

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