GCSE (9–1) Drama

Prescribed Text Guide

The Free9, In-Sook Chappell

Issue 1
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Prescribed edition for Component 3

*The Free9*, In-Sook Chappell – ISBN 9781350258433 (Bloomsbury, Methuen Drama).

**Summary**

A group of North Korean teenagers, desperate to escape the oppression and poverty they face on a daily basis, cross the border into China and together plan their long journey to South Korea and freedom. Flashbacks provide clues as to the background of each character, highlighting some of the harsh realities of life in North Korea. Putting their trust in a mysterious character known as Big Brother, they make it as far as Laos before being arrested and detained in a holding cell. While they maintain hope, they will be released into freedom, they are sent back to North Korea. The play is inspired by factual events.

**Scene 1**


A news reader hails the return of ‘Nine North Korean…orphans’ who had been ‘kidnapped’ by the South Korean regime. She claims the South would have tortured and executed them. The Nine, dressed in school uniform, give thanks to the ‘Great Marshall’ for rescuing and forgiving them. While they sing a song of praise to the North Korea leader, The Forgotten emerge on stage. They wear dirty clothes and stand to face The Nine. After some initial confusion, Mini recognises one of the Forgotten as her mother. Speaking as one, the Forgotten ask why The Nine are there. Poppy and Moon explain they were told to pack their bags as they were going to South Korea. As the scene ends, the Forgotten melt back into the shadows as The Nine remove their shirts to reveal dirty green t-shirts. The room becomes a detention cell with a high-barred window.

**Scene 2**

*A squalid room in a detention centre. Laos. Present day.*

Moon and Mini are discussing a popular TV show which Moon does not like. However, the others all speak in favour of it and Moon concedes that the show may have merits which he does not appreciate. Sunny wants to know why no-one has come for them with Poppy revealing they have been locked in the room for 2 days. The Nine discuss that they have travelled through three different countries so far – North Korea, China and Laos, and that they are not impressed by any of them. Blade wonders what is happening outside of the room and Moon suggests that, as it is getting late, there will be no progress for them this evening. The Nine begin to fall asleep and The Forgotten emerge from the shadows. One of them, known as ‘Forgotten Two’ appears to Blade as his mother and gives him a birthday cake. Poppy is called over and as the scene ends, Forgotten Two walks downstage, leading Blade and Poppy ‘into the past’.
Scene 3

Hyesan train station, North Korea. Eighteen months earlier.

The Forgotten become characters at the train station. Blade and Poppy are circulating, stealing from their bags. Poppy thinks he sees his father in the crowd, but it is not – leaving him feeling upset. They have not managed to acquire very much but share what they have between them. Poppy declares he will not come back to the train station and Blade wonders if their parents might still be alive, offering a clue as to why they are orphans living on the streets. They discuss going to China to find food and look for their parents. Blade agrees to talk to the others to persuade them they should go to China.

Scene 4

A squalid room in a detention centre. Laos. Present day. Sunlight shines through the window.

The girls are dancing, pretending to be in a K-Pop band. Rat (who is pretending to be a boy), Poppy and Blade ask if they can join in and Mini tells them they have to audition. Rat agrees and Mini begins to think of possible names for the band. Rat claims the name doesn’t matter as they will be free. Mini pounces on this and, after counting the eight people in the room, suggests ‘The Free9’. Moon points out there are only eight of them, but Mini is adamant that it must be ‘9’.

Scene 5

A derelict building, China. A year earlier.

Moon, Ice, Poppy and Blade are huddled around an unlit fire, while Rat is trying to find food at a local market. A bottle of apparently strong alcohol is offered around to take the chill off, but despite the cold, Moon refuses to let the others light a fire, for fear they will be discovered. Rat returns and has brought Big Brother with her. The group are very distrustful of Big Brother, who has brought them food and claims to want to help them. He offers shelter, food and a way to escape China. He leaves, saying they can contact him at the church in the market. After Big Brother leaves, the group discuss it and are very tempted to take him up on his offer.

Scene 6

A squalid room in a detention centre. Laos. Present day. Sunlight shines through the window.

The Free9 rehearse a dance routine in formation, the room is full of happiness and energy. As the routine develops, the boys make mistakes, causing them to lose focus and start laughing. Mini becomes increasingly frustrated and the boys become more serious. They ask for another chance to improve and they begin to rehearse again from the start of the routine.

Scene 7

A safe house, China. A year earlier.

Sunny, Jia and Mini are sat on the floor. Sunny is complaining that she has been held back from leaving, hinting it is because of Mini. She warns that they have to be careful about what they say in front of Big Brother as he reports everything back to the ‘network’.
A rhythmic (secret) knock is heard, and Moon, Ice, Blade, Poppy and Rat enter, claiming to be friends of Big Brother.

Chronologically, it is the first time the characters have met each other. Ice instantly tries to impress the girls while Rat notices the crucifix hanging on the wall. After some initial suspicion and questioning, everyone becomes more relaxed, and they discuss their lives. Rat is amazed by the television, something she has never seen before. They watch a science fiction show, talking about how realistic (or not!) it is. The discussion leads Mini to reveal that humans had walked on the moon, something that Moon finds very hard to believe. When he questions how Mini knows about this, she reveals the existence of the internet – another form of technology that the newcomers have never heard of. Mini clicks her fingers and a circle of light appears with some sparkling shoes and a wig. Mini steps into the ring of light and welcomes everyone to ‘Planet Mini’ – her own web page.

However, the page is used by South Korean Man One, a lonely man who wants to engage with young women. As they talk, he is replaced by Forgotten One – an echo of Mini’s lost mother, who reveals she was taken away suddenly. Big Brother then replaces Forgotten One. He tells Mini he wants to help her and can get her to South Korea. As he tries to tell her about his faith, the light snaps off, bringing them both back into the ‘reality’ of the safe house in China. He explains to the group that the safe house has been compromised and they must leave in the morning. He explains how they will all travel across China and claim asylum in Vietnam. Mini suggests a bolder plan of pretending to be a band on tour. Big Brother explains that if they were caught, they would face severe punishment, potentially death. The Nine form a circle and acknowledge their understanding of the risks they are about to take.

Scene 8

A squalid room in a detention centre. Laos. Present day. Sunlight shines through the window.

Mini observes Rat emerging from using the toilet and realises she is a girl. As Mini begins to talk about trust with Rat, the door opens, and a large bucket of water is placed in the room. Moon and Ice immediately sit up and declare that Ice will wash first. A disagreement breaks out about why the boys should always go first and soon, Mini is invited to wash before the others. However, as she begins to undress, the boys are watching her, commenting on how people used to watch her over the internet. While Mini defends herself, the conversation turns back to who should wash first and the boys choose Rat to wash first. They grab hold of Rat and start to undress her, still believing she is a boy. She struggles to get away from them, desperate to protect her secret and Mini steps in, calling Moon and Ice bullies. They stop, claiming it was just a joke and begin to wash themselves. Moon wonders if they have been duped by Big Brother while Mini promises to keep Rat’s secret safe. Rat explains that she hides the fact she is a girl to escape from the dangers of exploitation of being a girl living on the streets. However, Mini insists it is fun being a girl, promising to ‘teach’ Rat when they are safe.
Scene 9

*A beach in Qingdao, China. Three weeks earlier.*

Poppy and Jia stretch out on the beach after being stuck on a coach for hours. Poppy moves closer to Jia, but she rejects his advances and there is a moment of awkwardness between them. They briefly discuss the long train journey they will take across the North China Plain the following day and what they will do when they finally reach South Korea. Poppy takes Jia’s hand, which is a significant moment for them both. Blade enters unnoticed and begins to observe them. He says he needs to speak to Poppy urgently and Jia reluctantly leaves. They talk about possibility of finding their parents, concluding it is very unlikely. Blade begins to pour his heart out to Poppy, moving close to him and holding him tight. All of this is observed by Big Brother, who has entered unseen. Blade reaches out to Poppy and kisses him, taking Poppy by surprise. Poppy is frozen for a moment but then suddenly, violently pushes Blade away and exits, shocked. Big Brother moves in, asking him to ‘confess’ and offering to pray from him. Blade breaks down, telling Big Brother about how he watched his father beaten to death as he tried to steal grain from the army. He begs Big Brother to ‘save’ him through prayer. The scene is interrupted by Rat who enters eating an ice cream. She is amazed by the flavour and becomes excited by all the possibilities she may discover in a liberated life.

Scene 10

*A squalid room in a detention centre. Laos. Present day. The light through the window is fading.*

Rat and Ice discuss how far it might be to ‘Vien...’ (Vientiane – the capital of Laos). They are interrupted by Poppy and Jia shouting ‘surprise’ and the group singing ‘happy birthday’ to Blade. He is presented with a cake made of rice, complete with a candle. Everyone had spared their rations to be able to make it, demonstrating how much they care for each other. Poppy apologises for his earlier reaction to Blade, and they are reconciled. As they eat their cake, Moon raises the question about where Big Brother is and, even though he was captured with them, wonders why he is not in the same cell as them. This raises the possibility that he was actually a North Korean spy, using his Christian background as a cover. The scene ends with the group considering the possibility that Big Brother betrayed them.

Scene 11

*The China/Laos border. A week earlier.*

The Nine are preparing to cross the Chinese/Laos border and Big Brother prays for safe passage. Moon questions why they are crossing into Laos rather than Vietnam as agreed. Big Brother tells them that a group of North Koreans were caught in Vietnam and sent back, making that route unsafe. He explains The Nine must travel to a road where they can catch a bus to Vientiane. From there, they will claim asylum at the South Korean embassy. He reminds them that if any of them are caught, they must not admit they are part of a larger group, in order to protect the rest of them. On Big Brother’s signal, The Nine individually scramble across the border. Guards sweep the area with lights, trying to pick them out, calling for back up in the confusion. Most of the group manage to cross the border but Big Brother is caught. As the guards demand money as a bribe, Jia makes a
run for it but is caught in a beam of light, allowing Big Brother to make a run for it. Poppy creeps back to help Jia but Big Brother tells him to leave her and save himself. As a Border Guard tries to arrest Jia, Poppy pulls him to the ground, allowing them both to make a run for it. The Guards, confused, go to search in the wrong direction. The Nine keep moving, arriving at the bus stop and realising they have made it to Laos. Lights appear down the road and the Nine celebrate the arrival of the bus. However, the vehicle is actually police, who demand to see their papers. As they put their hands up, Big Brother tells the police ‘I can explain’.

**Scene 12**

*A squalid room in a detention centre. Laos. Present day. Sunlight shines through the window.*

The Forgotten sit among the group. The Nine discuss their fear as about being sent back to North Korea and are still contemplating if Big Brother was a spy. Jia, perhaps clinging to some hope, wonders if being sent back might not be so bad and Sunny suggests they pray, expressing that it feels comforting to think they are part of something bigger. Jia becomes agitated, worried that they may be left alone to die in this room while Poppy tries to reassure her. Meanwhile, Sunny and Blade consider the consequences of being sent back to North Korea, with Sunny revealing she has seen executions. Blade passes Sunny a razor blade that has been concealed in his shorts. He reveals that if they are sent back, he will end his life and implies she should do the same. Mini tries to comfort everyone by suggesting that many North Koreans make it to Laos, and they are simply waiting to be processed. Rat then declares that she may have a secret she wants to share while Mini suggests they imagine their new life in Seoul…

**Scene 13**

*Mini’s alternative future. Seoul, South Korea.*

Mini and Rat are trying on dresses. Rat is overwhelmed by Mini’s vision of the future. While Mini is excited about reinventing herself and being a star, Rat simply wants to be safe. Mini clicks her fingers and the scene changes to a television studio. Mini tells Rat that she will be a huge North Korean defector reality star, singing, dancing and endorsing products. The scene moves to Mini being interviewed about her upbringing. She reveals that her mother was taken when Mini was only 5 years old. When she was 8, her father sold her to be a ‘video girl’, an exploitative existence, but Mini saw it as an element of security. The Female Host then introduces her to Forgotten One – Mini’s mother. There is an emotional reunion before the show ends with a routine by The Free9. As the fantasy fades, there is a sound of a door being unlocked.

**Scene 14**

*A squalid room in a detention centre. Laos. Present day. Sunlight shines through the window.*

Big Brother is thrown into the room while Two Guards enter and tell The Nine, they are going to South Korea. There is huge joy and celebrations, with Blade and Sunny throwing away their razor blades. As they exit excitedly, music can be heard – the theme tune from the North Korean news programme from the opening scene.
Characters

Poppy
Poppy is a seventeen-year-old boy who has a strong friendship with Blade. They spent time working together to pick-pockets in order to survive. Often resourceful, his initial pessimism evolves into something more positive as he develops a strong fondness for Jia. His initial shock when Blade kisses him quickly passes and he makes a point of reconciling with Blade – a signal of his empathy, maturity and understanding. However, he is tortured by memories of his missing father which cause him a great deal of emotional pain.

Blade
As a child, Blade witnessed his father being beaten to death and was thrown out by his mother. While he is clearly very intelligent, he often defers to others. He does not understand the concept of ‘God’ very well but does appear to have strong feelings towards Poppy. The moment his advances towards Poppy are rejected, he initially sees his homosexuality as a ‘sickness’ and wants to be ‘cured’. By carrying two razor blades, he seems to be prepared to take his own life rather than return to North Korea.

Moon
As an eighteen-year-old male, Moon often appears to lead the group. From his derisory comments about the popular television show to refusing to let the group light a fire and his constant questioning and challenging of Big Brother, it is clear that he is not afraid of conflict. His mistrust of Big Brother is consistent. Although he does not say a lot, it is clear the rest of group trust and respect him.

Ice
Often the joker in the group, Ice seems to hide behind humour and not taking things seriously. However, he does show a degree of knowledge which indicates he is intelligent. However, he can also demonstrate quite stereotypical macho behaviour, such as when he tries to undress Rat for a wash, perhaps highlighting an element of immaturity.

Rat
Although a fourteen-year-old girl, Rat pretends to be a boy in order to protect herself from the terrible things that happen to girls on the streets. She naturally worries about the situation and is constantly questioning others. She develops a strong bond with Mini, who she admires for being proud of her gender. While her ambitions do not quite match Mini’s in terms of fame and fortune, Rat dreams of safety and security in her new life in South Korea.

Big Brother
A mysterious character that causes a great deal of suspicion, Big Brother is a Christian who leads the group over the border. He appears to have a great deal of knowledge of travelling and border crossings. Often clashing with Moon, he does lead the group into Laos but ironically is the one who is initially caught by the border guards. The truth of his identity is never revealed, allowing the audience to decide if he is a spy or genuinely trying to help.
Sunny

Sunny initially appears an emotional character but shows some leadership qualities while in the safe house. Having spent the most time waiting in the safe house, Sunny is desperate to make the crossing. However, on the journey, she is very cautious, revealing she has spent time in the guhoso (a detention centre for orphans), and has witnessed some very gruesome events, including executions.

Jia

Although only fifteen-years-old, Jia is not afraid to comment on events. She has a quiet courage and is not prepared to waste her time on petty squabbles. Her conversation with Poppy on the beach indicates she is hiding something of which she is ashamed, and she initially shies away from his affection. However, she appears to battle with her insecurity and allows Poppy to eventually take her hand. As the play concludes, Jia constantly asks questions, even displaying regret that she left North Korea, to reveal she is not completely confident in her decisions.

Mini

Although one of the youngest, Mini is also the biggest dreamer and has plans to be a famous K-Pop star. While this may appear to be naivety, Mini’s work as a ‘web-girl’ since the age of eight, has forced her to develop resilience and possibly pressed her to blur the lines between reality and fantasy. She is protective of Rat’s secret and promises to show her ‘how to be a girl’ when they reach South Korea. Mini is often at the heart of the group, and bit by bit, reveals information about her brutal upbringing, giving clues as to why she is such a free spirit.

The Forgotten

Acting as a chorus, The Forgotten take on a variety of roles, both as a collective and as individuals. Often silent, their physical reactions provide context and comment on the action, providing the audience with a wider perspective not always available to the characters on stage. They often appear to be echoes of the past, hinting that, in reality, there is little hope for The Nine.
Context to *The Free9*

The original performance took place at the Dorfman Theatre in 2018. There were various other performances of the play at venues in the UK at around the same time.

Students are required to refer to the context in which the text was created and first performed as part of their response to sub-question (b)(i). This could be the social, political, context and/or the context to the first performance, which for this text took place in 2018. Contextual information relating to this may also be covered in sub-question b(ii) and (c). The following contextual information may be of support to students when preparing for these questions.

*The Free9* was originally commissioned by NT Education as part of its Connections project, was performed by young performers for a predominantly youth audience. The first professional production was staged ‘end-on’ at the Dorfman Theatre, with minimal use of stage furniture and set items, however there were a number of other versions of the play staged as part of the Connections festival, in other theatre spaces around the UK.

Chappell encouraged young companies working with her play for the festival to have fun with the challenging aspects of the play such as movement, music and the chorus.

The play deals with a range of contemporary issues within a very specific, North Korean context and was inspired in part by the real case of the ‘Laos 9’, nine orphans who travelled across China to Laos, and were detained by the authorities there before being sent back to the North Korean regime they had fought so hard to escape. Chappell’s anger with the society that let these children down as well as with the global community that continues to fall short in its treatment of child refugees was a motivating factor in writing the play. As a young actress herself, she had a desire to create roles which represented people like her on stage. The play is an adventure story with elements of romance and adventure also communicates universal messages about identity, love and hope and an opportunity for audiences to gain a personal insight into one of the most secret societies in the modern world.

In recent years, the world has become concerned at the political and social developments within North Korea. From human rights to nuclear weapons, many democratic nations have criticised the North Korean regime. For many people, the only information known about the region relates to the testing of weapons or political conflict between nations, but as Chappell highlights in the notes which accompany the play, North Korea is full of real people who are experiencing real problems. The tight control over news and information restricts freedom of thought and expression, with a genuine belief that the Great Leader can ‘read your mind’. The constant threat of starvation or being arrested and sent to camps is a real and present fear for much of the population, while soldiers and secret police appear to operate without fear of reprisals.

Young people in North Korea have as recently as July 2021 been threatened with harsh reprisals by the government should they listen to the pop music of South Korea or use its slang, reminding audiences of the continuing relevance of Chappell’s play. The South Korean talk show *Now on my way to meet you* (on which Mini dreams of appearing) was still running in 2021; its cast is pre-dominantly made up of North Korean defectors and its intention is to break down prejudice in South Korea about the 25,000 or so North Koreans who now live in their country, While many of us in western democracies may complain about our lives, *The Free9* reminds us that there are significant imbalances in the world.
which should be questioned and challenged, and which drive people of all ages to take huge risks in order to escape.
Themes in *The Free9*

The desire for knowledge is a strong theme within *The Free9*, with the group often seeking answers to questions that haunt them. For many of the group, trying to find out what happened to their parents is key to helping them understand their place in life. By returning to the railway station each month, Poppy, Blade, Moon, Ice and Rat are hoping to be reunited with a parent who is missing – with Poppy demonstrating this need clearly when he thinks he sees his father. Mini also has used her access to the internet to learn about a range of things, including that humans have walked on the moon. She uses this knowledge to both impress but also to illustrate there is more to the world than they have been told. This promise of knowledge is a tantalising incentive to keep going in the hope of a better, freer life. It is also a reminder that knowledge is power, and the restriction of knowledge is a form of extreme control over people. In many societies, internet access gives people unlimited access to unlimited information and this is often taken for granted. However, appropriate use of information can empower people to question and challenge those in power, changing society.

This need for information also demonstrates another powerful theme within the play – risk. Each character is taking a huge risk through undertaking the journey of defection. If caught, the consequences of being sent back to North Korea could be devastating – even fatal. The boys risk their freedom by stealing from passengers at the railway station, while the girls take a risk by opening the door of the safe house after hearing two slightly different versions of the secret knock. The group take a big risk by trusting Big Brother and by physically crossing the border into Laos against armed guards. There are also individual, personal moments of risk, for example when Poppy expresses his feelings for Jia or when Blade kisses Poppy, revealing his sexuality. Therefore, while the situation they find themselves in push them to take such risks, the play reminds the audience that for progress and development, often an element of risk must be undertaken. And for risk to exist, there must be a chance of failure. For risk to lead to success, a key element must be that of trust and faith. Perhaps the most obvious example of faith is the religious faith of Big Brother, but all of the characters also put faith in Big Brother to get them to South Korea. While there is some lack of trust from some of the group, most notably Moon, the group do stick together and have faith that Big Brother will deliver his promise. Mini also has faith that she will be free and be able to fulfil the dream she has of becoming a K-Pop star. This dream drives her forward and is the source of her boundless energy and positivity. Blade has faith that Poppy will accept the revelation of his sexuality and, although initially rejected, Poppy does indeed accept and support Blade’s identity.

This theme of identity also runs deeply through the play. At one level, the oppression experienced in North Korea has prevented the group from being able to fully explore their own identity. It is perhaps interesting that the ages of the characters coincide with a period in most people’s lives when they truly are beginning to explore who they really are. This may be the catalyst for each of them to try to break free and escape North Korea. However, on a more personal level, individual identity is a powerful theme. Rat has disguised herself as a boy, apparently to protect herself from the dangers of being a girl living on the streets. While she does appear to want to begin living as a girl when she feels free, it is not fully clear how she is choosing to identify. Blade has also hidden his sexuality, likely because of how the existence of homosexuality is ‘denied’ in North Korea. Mini’s driving desire to become a K-Pop star pushes her towards appearing to live in a
semi-fantasy, possibly because she feels the need to distance herself from the traumatic events of her being a web-girl. In this case, the reality of her various identities are merging and clashing, preventing her from distinguishing the lines between her reality and the fantasy of the men who watch and exploit her online, forcing her to create a whole new ‘reality’ where she is in control.

Betrayal is also present within the play, with many characters experiencing some form in their earlier lives. Mini is given up by her father, who sends her into the life of a web-girl, whereas Blade is sent away by his mother after watching his father beaten to death. Both seem to indicate that these acts are a betrayal of parenting – especially when other characters spend so much time looking for the parents that have gone missing. The lack of clarity regarding Big Brother’s honesty and motives also give rise to suspicions of betrayal. Is he a spy or double agent, actually working to get them caught and returned to North Korea? Conversely, Mini chooses not to betray Rat by keeping her true gender a secret – and interesting insight for someone who suffered so much betrayal in her past.
Resources for The Free9

There are a wealth of resources available on the Pearson Edexcel website and these are being added to and updated regularly. These resources, including the Sample Assessment Materials, and specimen paper and mark scheme, are free to download.

There is also a helpful preface by In-Sook Chappell and a full set of production notes in the prescribed version to the text.

Online resources

Review of the original 2018 NT Connections production
Review of an alternative performance produced for the 2018 NT Connections programme.
Full version of the play on YouTube (South London Theatre)
In-Sook Chappell talking about the play for the Connections Festival

Background Resources – North Korea and The Laos Nine

Human Right Watch report
BBC news article on ban on South Korean bands and slang
North Korean Freedom Coalition Laos Nine factsheet
The Guardian article on Laos Nine
The Korean Herald article on Laos Nine
The Daily Mail article about Now on My Way to Meet You, the South Korean TV variety show referred to in the play.
Clip from Now on My Way to Meet You
Practical activities to help prepare for Component 3

The following suggested exercises may help students practically explore some of the key characters, themes and ideas that are central to *The Free9*, and to have some practical experience of bringing the text to life.

Students must respond to the text as performers, directors and designers, so practical experience of all of these roles will be useful. However, the questions are grouped into two areas:

- activities for performers and for directors of performers
- activities for designers and for directors of production elements.

1. Performers and Directors of Performers: Questions (a)(i), (a)(ii) and (b)(ii)

There are a number of performance elements which will come up across these 3 questions:

- vocal skills/voice
- physical skills/movement
- non-verbal communication
- stage space and stage directions.

Best practice would therefore be to ensure that all students have an understanding of each performance element and how it could be used to enhance the play in performance, as well as a grasp of how to use these elements as a performer and as a director.

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 news report where some of the characters are interviewed for the local state-run paper (depending on the chosen performance context) after reporters are ‘tipped off’ about events surrounding The Nine’s situation at the end of the play. Characters who have had contact with The Nine may be able to comment on the group’s emotional and mental state. It is also an opportunity to explore if there is any contrast between what is projected by the state and the reality of the children, as well as what the relationships between characters are after their return.

Past 10 seconds – while this may need specific planning, due to the non-linear structure of the piece, it may support understanding of how the flashback scenes are important to the narrative. In this activity, take the characters back in time in stages: 10 seconds before the start of the events of the play, then 10 minutes, then 10 hours. Then take them forward again to show how the established events of the play unfold highlighting individual characters internal conflicts and determination to remain true to their ambitions. This kind of activity might be particularly useful as students are first exploring the play.

Hot-seating is a valuable and exciting method to develop characterisation and to explore motive/objective. It would also help students to consider the journey of the character in the context of the complete text. This would work well to develop understanding of improvisation work early on in the process but would also be an excellent practical revision technique for students.
A more theatrical way of exploring hot-seating might be to combine this exercise with an off-text improvisation. For example, take some of the events as described by the Blade – for example, watching his father being beaten and then being thrown out by his mother – and devise work around these events in order to develop an understanding of the extent of his desperation.

Exploring voice and vocal skills such as volume, pitch, tone, pace, pause, emphasis, accent and dialect can also help performers and directors of performers to consider character choices. How might vocal choices help the audience understand the characters background? How might they show an understanding of the character at that moment within the play? Does it make a difference if certain words are emphasised in one reading, but different words are emphasised in an alternative reading? Does it help to explore a sequence of lines by placing pauses in different places? What impact might delivering the same line in a whisper or raised volume have on the meaning?

Still image and mime are often highly effective in exploring the use of physical skills, non-verbal communication and the use of space. Students could be given the opportunity to look at relationships and emotions within a given moment from the text by creating either a short sequence of mime or a series of still images. Using facial expression, movement, gesture, posture and their proxemics (or position within the performance space) will enhance understanding of how these characters might be feeling at this moment, or what they might want to achieve.

There are numerous opportunities within the text to explore physical reactions to the interaction between characters, such as Poppy and Jia. For example, their cautious affection for each other is blocked by the fear of the dangers they face. Non-verbal communication may communicate subtext and detail about how Moon really feels about trusting Big Brother or how Mini feels when discussing her past.

Following practical activities, evaluating the ways in which performance skills have been used and asking students to offer reasons for their performance choices verbally after sharing work, will also help students become more confident with the relevant vocabulary. Rehearsing a key scene with a particular focus is also a helpful activity for students. This focus might be the kind of statement to be found in question (b) (ii) for example, ‘Sunny is scared’. Assigning the role of director to one student within each group and asking the director to verbally justify or give reasons for the choices made when producing the scene, will help all students to grasp the role of the director and to feel more confident about responding on paper to question (b)(ii).

Once students are more confident in working as a director, or with a student director, further explorative activities might be useful. For example, exploring the use of stage space with the director. The director assigns roles and gives each character a double who feeds lines to the performer, allowing the performers to move around the space without needing to hold a script. The director gives clear suggestions for the use of space and movement to the performers. This could also be applied to vocal and/or physical skills.
2. Designers and Directors of Production Elements: Questions (b)(i) and (c)

There are six production/design elements which will come up across these two questions:

- staging
- set
- props and stage furniture
- costume
- lighting
- sound.

Three of these will be possible options on each question with all six appearing on the paper each year. Best practice would therefore be to ensure that all students have an understanding of each production/design element and how it could be used to enhance the play in performance. A grasp of how the differences in approaching these elements as a director and as a director will also be valuable.

It might be useful to set up a production meeting and pitch for your students. In this model, for example, a small group of five could consist of a director, set, costume, sound and lighting designers. The director then asks important questions to each member of the production team in order to develop a creative concept for a production of the play and then sells a potential ‘theatrical’ pitch to the teacher (producer or ‘dragon’ in order to secure funding).

The teacher should support students by ensuring that the students all have a good understanding of the text and of appropriate performance styles for this text. Each member of each production team must justify their ideas by referring to key moments from the play. This is a useful discussion exercise that also lends itself to research, images and presentations. It would also make an excellent ‘active’ revision session in time for the written examination.

The original play was first performed in 2018 and set in contemporary times. Students may adapt the setting/time period as preferred. Any such choice must be justified with a clear sense of why the time period was chosen. Designers/directors will also need to think about how their chosen performance style will be supported through design and about how design elements will be used to time passing and the increase in tension throughout the play. Designers/directors will also need to think about how their chosen performance style will be supported through design and about how design elements will be used to symbolise key themes and build tension throughout the play.

Creating a model box or stage plan 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 or episode will be played in a potential space, and to choose a specific stage. By creating this visually they will be able to refer more easily to their ideas when writing about set, stage furniture or staging in particular. The Free9 was originally staged at the National’s Dorfman Theatre, a modern end-on theatre. However, students may choose to change the type of staging and approach to set, for example, using symbolic set and stage furniture items to emphasise cultural references, and the changes in location.
Exploring different music and sound effects for key moments is another effective way of considering how sound design can play an important role in the development of a key idea of theme. There are a number of sound cues within the text already and these could be created live or using recorded sound. Similarly, there are opportunities for music and sound to be used to create atmosphere and/or location, for example, consider the sounds from the nightclub or cellar. How might these punctuate the narrative and support moments of tension or revelation?

What theatrical impact is created when you explore the use of different sound effects at different volumes? Does music or sound effects underscore key moment, for example – The Nine crossing the Chinese/Laos border?

If students have access to different lighting effects, it might be useful to explore key moments in different lighting states. There are a number of lighting changes and effects within the play text, and these could be created using colour, intensity and specific lighting effects such as gobos and spotlights. Although the play is set in multiple locations, there is a constant return to the detention centre. In many cases, it is made clear what sort of natural light is coming through the window. Therefore, the lighting state in your interpretation can reflect both the changes in location and time, as well as indicating the difference between reality and fantasy. Considering more abstract lighting at moments during the play may help in communicating this wide range of ideas. Different kinds of lantern could be used to create shadows/suspense and to emphasise key themes.

If students do not have access to lighting, you might want to consider the effect of torches. There is software available online that will help you to create a virtual set and lighting grid for a production of the play. Students could also have a look at images from the 2018 production as well as previous adaptations and lighting designs to see how other theatre makers have used lighting to create impact.

Another useful exercise that helps to build the world of the play and develop ideas for performance is designing potential costumes and props. Research is key and will help students who are initially daunted about the thought of ‘designing’. Students do not have to be great artists to create great designs. Students could be asked to link their intentions verbally with the initial production, as they will need to do in question (b)(i), either because they are adopting a similar approach or because they are developing different ideas. Costume designers will need to think about how both the chosen time period, the performance style, cultural considerations and characterisation/status will be supported through the style of the costume for each character.

While the majority of these activities will result in informal sharing within the class, using the set text as the basis for more formal performance work is also worth considering.

The Free9 is a prohibited text for Component 2. However, students might complete a mock performance from text in year 10 using extracts from their prescribed text. This will not only support performance and design skills; it will also help students to become confident with staging extracts from the play for an audience.