

Idle Motion's The Seagull Effect Education Pack

Idle Motion have been creating highly visual theatre since 2007. The company met at secondary school, producing A-level and GCSE pieces together. Since then they have worked collaboratively to devise their productions, embracing the unknown and using play, workshops and improvisation to form their ideas and pieces. Their commitment to watching and sharing theatre is essential to their work, as is the sense of enthusiasm and fun that remains a constant in their rehearsals.

They are based in Oxford and are working as Artists in Residence at The Oxford Playhouse. They are a small company with big ideas and a huge passion for creating exciting and beautiful new work.



Activity:

Discuss the Idle Motion's style.

Prompts:

Visual, filmic, physical theatre, devised theatre.

Context of 'The Seagull Effect'

In 1987 Britain was hit by a storm that was the largest storm in living memory. Our artistic director Paul Slater has many memories of that night, which was the initial idea for 'The Seagull Effect'.

As a young boy growing up in Essex, 1987 was characterised for me by a snow drift which left us housebound and the storm that wrecked havoc through much of the South-East. I can remember that night clearly - myself, my sister and the dog all being tucked up in my parents double-bed scared senseless by the banging loft hatch and smashing tiles. It felt like the end of the world. During last summer I thought of all the other extraordinary stories that emerged, of near misses, luck, courage and many people who simply slept straight through it. It felt like a great opportunity to share people's memories and the little and large ways that it affected their lives, all as a result of a tiny change in the atmosphere somewhere near the Azores.

When looking into ideas of weather predictions Paul Slater found ideas concerning the beginnings of 'chaos theory'. This appeared to link into themes that we had also come across in the storm. In prediction, particularly weather prediction, small things can make big differences. In extreme weather events this is highlighted through the origins of extreme weather (hurricanes can be caused by little more than the flap of a seagulls wing), to the small choices that people may make in these situations (whether to put the car in the garage) and the larger consequences these may have in these situations.

Chaos Theory

When understanding the world around us it is hard to grasp the effect of minute, seemingly insignificant changes. Chaos helps us to describe and understand these random changes. Though chaos may not know the origin of these small differences it helps us to cope with them through observing and describing the exponential growth of the small difference, and therefore allowing us to forecast their effects.

Facts on the 1987 storm

- It was the largest storm to hit Britain since Victorian times
- It went largely unforecast, some reporters spoke of strong winds but it was thought the stormy weather would pass England moving further South
- Winds were up to 100 miles/hour
- 19 people died
- Approx 15 million trees were blown down
- A lot of trees fell over telephone and electricity wires, leaving thousands of people without electricity for 24 hours

The Process:

Initial ideas: storm, couple, memories, narrator character who was obsessed with the weather, verbatim text. Coinciding with this is lengthy research on the storm, ideas around weather predictions, the political and cultural climate of the 1980s, interviews with people who experienced the storm.

Week and a half of workshop ideas led by our artistic director- mainly couple based, weather, visual ideas- start playing around with projection etc. Most of what is seen in the play will have come in those first days.



Start to really shape the ideas that came out of workshopping, start looking at them in terms of a narrative and scenes. With the couples scenes- split off into pairs, and improv, share our scenes with each other then reflect on parts we like/that worked.



Start to map out a play with the scenes we have- seeing if anything needs to be taken out or added. Start to polish - for this an outside eye is essential.

Research on the storm, ideas around weather predictions, chaos theory, political and cultural climate of the 1980s, interviews with people who experienced the storm.



Share research with each other and mark out the important areas to us. Then start linking them with visual ideas. Interview people who understand ideas of chaos theory. Start writing collaboratively, going away and writing different versions for each scene- bringing them back together and merging/ altering them.



Writing and visual start to become one. Improvised scenes of couple get honed into script. At this stage we had a dramaturg come in to help as an objective outside eye.

In our research and development time, we met and interviewed many people who had experienced the storm, many of which you hear extracts of in the play as voiceovers. This is an example of the memories we collected:

The big storm of October, 1987.

I lived in Lewes then, as I still do now: it was pretty much the “bullseye” for the storm.

I slept right through it; the first I knew that something was amiss was when the cat woke me up – that was not possible, for he was always in the kitchen overnight - but the air pressure had forced open the roller catches on the doors. I went to turn on the bedside light to see what the time was: no power. I removed the cat, got up and looked out of the window. Across the street it looked as if a giant with a huge hammer had passed by in the night. Roofs were caved in and neighbours were trying to haul a flapping tarpaulin over a hole in their roof. I could see in the half-light that trees were down across the road further down the estate.

We lived in a semi, rather tucked under the crest of the downs, with some degree of shelter from the south-west, but, once I was dressed and outside, I could see that our immediate neighbours, not conjoined, had lost all the heavy ridge tiles from the near edge of their roof, while we, not 20 feet away, appeared to have no damage at all: that is how random it seemed - and was. On reflection, we felt a bit as if the ‘angel of death’ had passed over us, as in Exodus, 12. In the days that followed I found that the damage to our property amounted to one broken roof-tile (high up and never replaced) and an up-ended laburnum tree. Others were not so fortunate.

The house immediately opposite us lost their shed – and I use the term “lost” advisedly, because it was just ‘gone’: lifted off its concrete base, floor intact. Later that day they found it more or less complete, two gardens away, with a lawn-mower and all the other garden gear still inside it! I heard this story told, most animatedly, in the hairdressers a few days later.

In the next street someone who usually parked on his driveway had decided to put his car into his 1940s sheet-asbestos garage, since it looked like it might be a wild night. It collapsed on his car.

Someone else, a little further down the road, was disturbed by the noise of the storm and, in the middle of the night, moved into the spare room. Soon afterwards, the chimney-stack collapsed, striking his side of the bed with two tons of bricks and terrifying his still-sleeping wife.

These things all happened within a hundred yards of where I lived. How many more such stories must there be of that night, as yet untold?

I worked at a boarding school three miles away, but was unable to get there. By taking a very circuitous route through the town, avoiding fallen trees and with tiles crunching under my tyres, I got within a mile of work when I was stopped and turned back by workmen guarding live electricity cables which were draped across the road. I got in later in the day. The school took half term a week early, but it was without electricity for 10 days and we lost all the frozen food in 4 big chest freezers. The big thatched roof was all but bare on one side – with reeds scattered far and wide; the other, lee side looked almost untouched. We had an emergency staff meeting the next day surrounded by buckets and bowls to catch the drips and rivulets from a leaking roof.

Marcus Taylor

Phone call exercise

This is an exercise we used at the first workshop activity we did for the couple scenes and which eventually became the phone conversation:

- For warm up walking around the space, meet with another person in the room and then fall down to floor in each others arms- also do this with lifts.
- Have eye contact, and start to play around with each other using your eye contact, move your body but focus eyes.
- Then when you meet, pretend you're a bit nervous, haven't seen each other for a while. Last time you saw each other was embarrassing- keep eye contact and movement.
- Then move again, this time when you talk, pretend that you have split up, it's the first time you've seen each other- improvise- at the end, go together then drop together- reflect the way the dialogue has ended in the way you drop down together.
- Whilst one couple start talking the others go into slow-motion movement.

Exercise on going back in time/evoking memories:

This exercise was one of the first ones we did. This helped ideas on how to evoke a period of time quickly. Sharing personal stories with each other is very important to our process –it helped with creating ideas for more personal stories in the narrative. (couple, narrators story.)

- Tell a story behind a song which evokes a particular time in your life, tell the story to the group whilst the song is playing in the background
- Create a sequence of 8 different ways of sitting on a chair which reflects the feel of the story and song.
- Tell the story over the eight different movements (Looped if necessary)
- Create tableaux which punctuate different moments/images in the story, then add these into the 8 different movements. Go through these whilst slowly moving from the front to the back of the stage. At the front the story teller is centre stage and slowly moving away from audience too. At the end of the story the storyteller joins the last tableaux.

Use of verbatim text

Highlight key visual words in the text.

Create held images that represent these (this could be through tableaux's using the actor's, or if you are doing puppetry and object manipulation this also works well.)

Identifying themes and narratives:

1. List the main narratives within the piece

2. How did these relate to the overall themes of the play?

Prompts: Prediction, weather and the effect on our everyday lives, the storm of 1987, how small changes can have big effects.

3. How were these themes expressed visually?

Activity: List three images you saw in the play, and as a group discuss what feelings these provoked and how.

Image 1:

Image 2:

Image 3:

A Writing Scheme for 'The Seagull Effect'

The Context

What did you watch, who was it by, where and when did you see it? What type of theatre did you see it in? What defines Idle Motion as a theatre company style? What did this add to the actor audience relationship? What narratives did the play follow? How were these stories linked to each other and linked to a theme of the play? What was the effect of having an actor in the audience?

Analysing the tones created by the piece

Describe **two contrasting** moments in the play. How was it engaging? Was it a comic moment? If so, how did they create the comedy? A touching moment ... how did they make it touching? Or a sad moment... how did they make it sad? What Images were powerful? How were these created? How did the actors respond to each other? How did they hold themselves physically? What was the emotional tone of their voice? Was there any subtext? Did they use pause or silence? What was their eye focus doing?

Moment 1:

Moment 2:

Analysing the Acting

Which one of the actors impressed you the most? How did they show emotion? What did their character add to the narrative? What did they do physically and vocally? Did you empathise with them? Did they change character? How did they telegraph this to an audience? Were they funny? Awkward? Did you feel sorry for them? How did they do this? How did the actors work together as an Ensemble? Explain an Ensemble moment which really impressed you? How did they create tension in their voice? What did you read in their body language? Was there subtext used in the scene?

Analysing the Lighting and Sound

How was lighting used to establish different places and locations? Was it warm or cold? Clinical or intimate? Describe how the lighting was used in the opening section with the mysterious lady calling her son/ BBC? Met office? What was the effect of the strobe? How did the sound did it make the action filmic? Describe the effect that the wind and rain had in each scene? Describe how the actors brought the voiceovers alive. What was the effect of the real documentary voices(verbatim text). How were projections used? What was the effect of all the opening images going back in time? What was the effect of the overhead camera projecting the intimate movement piece on the bed?

Analysing the Set and props

How were different locations created, for example, the car, the weather, the studio, the phone box, the BBC room? How was the bed used? (a butterfly house, a train station, a bed) What did the woman falling through the bed signify? What did the table breaking apart signify? How was the wind used what did it signify?

Final thoughts

What were your overall impressions of the play? What was it that engaged or did not engage you?



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Idle Motion Workshops

Idle Motion offer exciting workshops that use exercises we utilise in our creative process, to help students explore creative and playful routes into the devising process. These work particularly well with students who have seen our work as it gives an insight into how we created the piece and a chance to see where the exercises can lead encouraging them to be more confident and creative theatre makers. In our workshops we draw on skills such as storytelling using verbatim text, puppetry, object manipulation and physical characterisation. We prefer not to work on a 'one workshop fits all' basis and therefore are happy to tailor around the current syllabus and the needs of the school or community groups we work with.

Idle Motion's workshops were extremely well received by our students, who were stretched both creatively and technically by the work. The workshops were also superbly well delivered – purposeful, fun, engaging and inspiring. But above all, there is a clear understanding of what it is like to be a student. The workshop leaders are genuinely passionate about teaching and making theatre with young people.

Gavin Henry, Head of Drama, Sevenoaks School

For any information on workshops, or anything else about Idle Motion's work contact Sophie Cullen at sophie@idlemotion.co.uk