

### That Face Knowledge Organiser

- 6 marks for demonstration of knowledge and understanding of how theatre is *developed*.
- 12 marks for demonstration of knowledge and understanding of how theatre is *performed*.

Design/performance decisions need to support the playwright's intentions. References must be made to the text as a whole.

### Top band marks:

- Sophisticated interpretation of the extract showing comprehensive knowledge and understanding of how ideas and intentions are developed.
- Comprehensive knowledge of theatrical elements and techniques showing perceptive understanding of their application in the performance of the extract.
- Demonstrates sophisticated consideration of how theatrical elements can be used in performance to create mood, atmosphere and impact and communicate meaning to an audience.
- Comprehensive ideas and examples are offered from the extract and the text as a whole. Articulate use of subject-specific terminology.

### Performers:

#### "As a performer..."

- Should express ideas about their intentions for the portrayal of a specified role in performance.
- Fulsome, creative and perceptive grasp of how they intend to interpret and portray a role, providing justification for creative choices.
- Demonstrate a comprehensive knowledge and understanding of the complete text and extract.
- Interpretation will be portrayed effectively to an audience using a range of performance techniques.
- Put the audience at the heart of the response – what impact your choices would have on the audience.
- Justify performance choices in connection with the playwright's intentions.
- Highlight themes/issues making links to quotations, to provide justification/effective analysis.
- Remember to focus on a key role.
- Don't create descriptive responses, which lack the subject-specific vocabulary to define performance skills.
- You must make links with the naturalistic tones of the piece.
- Remember to reference the play as a whole.
- Don't show uncertainty through using words such as "perhaps", "could" or "maybe".

For each scene think about the following:

- interpretation of character
- interpretation, aims and intentions
- use of language
- vocal expression
- characterisation and the relationship between other characters in the extract
- use of gesture, movement, physicality, poise, stillness, body language, facial expressions and other forms of non-verbal communication
- the relationship between movement and speech
- the influence or use of props in relation to movement
- use of space, levels and proxemics
- stage directions
- mood and atmosphere
- relationships and dynamics between characters in the extract
- relationship with the audience
- specific moments from the extract to support ideas
- entrances and exits
- performance style and theatrical influence
- intended audience impact.

#### Designer:

#### “As a designer...”

- Throughout you must, realise a rationale that meets the demands of the question, honours the playwright’s original intentions and explicitly references the whole of the play.
- Offer sufficient examples to demonstrate to the examiner that your ideas could work in performance.
- How can design elements support characterisation, themes and issues, time, location etc.
- Again, how do these ideas/elements create impact on the audience?
- **Required to respond to the question as a designer, acknowledging the playwright’s intentions and stage directions, whilst resolving the design challenge of creating/supporting the impact inherent in the extract, and the play as a whole.**
- Candidates can be imaginative and make creative choices, but their rationales must acknowledge the playwright’s original intentions and be justified in terms of how these are honoured.
- Responses also need to extend beyond the extract to consider design implications for the whole play.
- Don’t move to far away from the original intentions.
- Your ideas have to be able to work onstage; not too farfetched.
- Refer to the play’s title in your response so that the examiner knows what you are answering.
- Candidates stated their intention clearly, placing audience understanding of impact at the heart of the response. Such responses had clarity, providing examiners with a clear sense of intentions dramatically, visually, and aurally.
- *That Face* often did not consider how design could be used in a naturalistic way to generate impact.

For each scene think about the following:

- set, lighting, sound, music and costume
- make – up, masks, puppets and props
- other visual or special effects such as smoke, haze, projections
- use of space, staging, proxemics, levels, entrances and exits
- how their chosen theatrical element(s) will create impact for an audience
- how their chosen theatrical element(s) will communicate ideas and meaning to an audience
- actor / audience relationship
- use of theatrical venue
- the impact of specific technical and creative choices
- performance style
- theatrical influence
- intended audience impact.

### **Polly Stenham's Career:**

- 2005 Joins the Royal Court London's young writers programme and starts her debut play, *That Face*.
- 2006 Leaves university to concentrate on playwriting.
- 2007 The Royal Court stages *That Face* to critical acclaim, earning Stenham several awards.
- 2008 *That Face* transfers to the West End and Stenham is commissioned to adapt it into a film.
- 2009 *Tusk Tusk* is performed at the Royal Court Theatre in London.

Polly Stenham pocketed the word precocious when *That Face* opened at the Royal Court in 2007. Her portrait of a family in Freudian meltdown was hailed as an astonishing, groundbreaking debut. The multi award-winning production, starring Lindsay Duncan as an alcoholic, addled mother, transferred to the West End for another sell-out run. Her follow-up play, *Tusk Tusk*, opened at the Royal Court in May, 2009.

Stenham dedicated *That Face* to her dad, and credits him with instilling in her a love of theatre. However, she always wanted to write novels, not plays, and so commenced a degree at UCL in English. Writing *That Face* when she was accepted on a Royal Court writers' programme meant she 'fell' into playwriting. She says, "and I feel so lucky I did. It makes sense of the world. And even if it didn't, it just makes me so happy."

### **POLLY STENHAM**

"The expectation was mammoth. I was in rehearsals all day, writing all night, and by the end

I was this shaky little wreck. The Royal Court had to put me to bed at one point.”

Stenham wrote *That Face* when she was only 19. The production transferred from the Royal Court to the Duke of York’s Theatre, making Stenham the youngest playwright in the West End since Christopher Hampton in 1966.

“I saw a grown man standing outside in the West End crying his eyes out. A silver-haired man in a suit, just crying and crying, and I watched him from across the road. It was a really weird feeling – like shooting a bullet and it going all the way round the theatre and then you're seeing it hit someone and thinking, ‘Oh God. It’s so much more common than people realise, manic depression, but it’s taboo.”

Polly Stenham's parents divorced when she was about 13. Polly and her sister Daisy were brought up by their tycoon businessman father, Cob. Stenham attended Wycombe Abbey and Rugby public: both expensive English boarding schools. Stenham had an excellent relationship with her father, but her mother, Anne O'Rawe, a painter, is a different matter. Polly has said that she has not seen her mother for years.

#### POLLY STENHAM

“Because the theatre is very extreme. If it's crap, it's so crap but if it's good, it's the best way of telling a story ever, because it's live in front of you and it touches you in a way that I don't think the flatness of a cinema screen or the distance of a book perhaps can.”

In a review of a Melbourne production of Stenham’s first play, *That Face*, Alison Croggon wrote, “Stenham appears to be that rarest of beasts, a natural dramatist.”

The Australian, Monday, May 17, 2010.

In a review of an Australian production of Polly Stenham’s first play, *That Face*, Alison Croggon writes, “The [class difference] resonance simply doesn't translate to Australia: yes, we have class in our society, but it's quite a different deal here. We might even have colonial imitations of the British class system, but they don't function in the same ways or with the same codes.

#### **Interview with Polly Stenham on 2nd day of rehearsals - 20th March 2007**

#### **What are the main themes in the play?**

Responsibility. Love. Mainly responsibility.

**In the first read through I became aware of two parents who have completely reneged on their responsibilities. The father is worse because he goes off to the other side of the world. I found it almost incredible that he wouldn't have kept up any contact.**

80% of divorced fathers never see their children again after two years.

**Do you think Martha is an alcoholic who has mental health issues or is it the other way round or is she a woman who has been abandoned by her husband?**

Not the latter. I couldn't really the answer the other, I think they are so entwined, like lots of people who drink – it masks something else.

**What's it masking for Martha?**

Manic depression. Brought on by post natal depression because it was a bad pregnancy with Mia.

**That's interesting that you choose not to reveal this in the play other than when Martha does say how perfect she felt when pregnant with Henry. So she has always hated Mia?**

Yes.

**You have been quoted as being critical of the Royal Court's 'kitchen sink' drama as being somewhat voyeuristic as the people that come to the theatre are middle class and are looking at working class people and how they behave...**

I do think it's time for the programming to change.

Dominic Cooke has also stated he wants to see the middle classes portrayed on our stage. But isn't this play just as voyeuristic? Aren't we just looking at a middle class family expose their worst secrets and their bad behaviour? Is that any less voyeuristic?

That's a really good question. I think theatre is always going to be voyeuristic because you're a fourth wall aren't you? You are watching people in ways and places you never could. That is part of the thrill of it being live; there is something naughty in that. But voyeuristic is a blanket term isn't it? I think it's equally voyeuristic seeing things which should be private. But the difference – I'll be really blunt - between the shows I have been to - which I've really enjoyed and found challenging – is that there is a generic type of audience here but the shows seem so far from that type, and there seems a massive barrier between us. It's almost like maybe they are asking for pity? Like aren't we glad we are not a scaghead in Leicester? Instead of oh my god, my neighbours could be doing that. It's very hard to answer

this without any degree of political correctness. It's a very important question that I should think more about.

Some think there is a victim culture that has developed within certain groups where they claim benefits and never work. Maybe this links in with what you were talking about.

As British people we get so hung up on class. After seeing so much stuff that is not like my life or like the lives of any of the audience, I think I want to peeve a bit on people from the world I know, it's less political and more personal. It might hit a bit closer. I've seen so much of that world that was my theatre awakening so it's more refreshing for me. I think I prefer things in the old vein like Edward Albee and Tennessee Williams, more wordy, less bloody.

### **Did you do any research?**

Some. I looked at the effect of Valium, read some mental health acts, looked into alcoholism. I called the speaking clock! I've done a lot more research on my new play, which is about religion and I needed to.

We have a work experience placement who is 14 and I let her read the 1st scene. And she was quite offended as she is a Christian.

Yes it is offensive isn't it? No one has mentioned it so far. It suggests that there aren't that many religious people in the industry.

### **Given that you are writing about the world you know did you interview anyone?**

No.

### **How do you hope the play will affect the audience?**

I'd like it to stir them up a bit. I hope it will make them sad because it is a tragedy. I hope that it will make them think about something that interests me which is your responsibility towards people you love – when should you leave them, when are you making it better and when are you making it worse trying to help and when would you make it better by just walking away. Sometimes love can make things worse.

### **Do you think 15 year olds can watch this play?**

Yeah 15 upwards. Mia is 15.

### **Did you have any actors in mind for this role?**

No, I was enormously surprised that it got put on! I didn't think that far ahead.

**Is it demanding for you in the rehearsal room – are you being asked lots of questions?**

I've got to finish the absolute final draft of the play and that is really challenging. It's definitely the hardest bit. It's like a really complicated stack of dominoes and if you move one bit it could un-pin loads. And having a lot of input all at once which can be confusing but helpful also. We are going through the play now scene by scene and stopping to really clarify.

**So through that process you are sort of bombarded.**

Yes but I enjoy it.

**What made you become a playwright. What was your journey?**

That's a lovely question to be asked - I don't really feel like one! (LM you are - you're at the Royal Court!) I was going to the theatre for a very long time, I'm production trained, and I always wrote fiction. It brings together all these things I love. I love the live quality.

My father first took me to the theatre. He took me a lot, and took me to some quite inappropriate things when I was younger – two or three times a month mostly to the fringe and here. It's such fun when your that age –still is.

**What plays really affected you?**

The first play that really upset me was the Shape of Things by Neil La Bute at the Almeida, and I cried at the end. A Streetcar Named Desire at the National with Glenn Close was brilliant. And The Pillowman, that really upset me.

Here at the Court I like the International work. I really liked Ladybird. A lot of it seems more risky.

**You have mentioned Albee and Williams. What other theatre artists influence you?**

I think Sam Shepherd is phenomenal. He writes with such muscle. The way he writes about alcohol. Caryl Churchill. I don't think I could write in that style but it shows such discipline, a remove. Anthony Neilson I like a lot, he's funny. Martin McDonough – he's got great black humour. I have huge respect for Leo (Butler) he's a great teacher and I think his work is so understated. He's really special isn't he? (LM Yes)

**Anyone else within the arts – painters, musicians etc?**

I listen to a lot of music. I like Nan Goldin. Her photos are quite theatrical, quite intimate of her friends and Wolfgang Tilmans, a German photographer. He also takes pictures of his

friends in the crazy Berlin gay clubbing world, a bit like Nan Goldin again. You feel like you shouldn't be there (LM you said that about your play earlier) yes it's that voyeurism

### **Any other comments?**

I would like to stress how much I feel I owe the Royal Court – how grassroots I feel coming through here. This would have never happened without YWP. It's such a fantastic initiative, such good work. Lots of very different people, no particular type and when you start there you feel very connected to the theatre.

### **Interview with Jeremy Herrin, 3rd day of rehearsal - 21st March 2007**

#### **Why did you choose to direct this play?**

Dominic Cooke asked me to come and meet Polly and I've always respected Dominic and his work, so immediately I took it seriously. And then I read the play and I really wanted to do it and then I met Polly and then I definitely had to do it. I think it's a combination of the quality of her writing and the fact that she's such a young writer is exciting. Sometimes when you read a first play like that you think there's a possibility that they're only writing from a very direct experience and although that's interesting and valid you sometimes wonder whether a writer has got that further energy that will turn them into a "proper" writer – and I think Polly's got that. She's really smart and she's very clear about what she wants. Immediately when we started talking about staging ideas we were talking the same language.

#### **Tell me about your staging ideas**

We're going to do it in the round with only one or two rows of seating. All the domestic stuff happens in Henry's bedroom, so there's a double bed in the middle of the space all the way through. Then all the other scenes – the boarding school, the hospital, the restaurant and Hugh's flat – they're all happening in the other corners. So that everything is referring to this central relationship to this bed. That means we can suggest an environment with the other scenes and be more detailed with Henry's room as well as seeing it change over the course of the evening. We don't have to get it off and on which we would have to do if we did this play end on, we'd just have these boring challenges of how to do that. So to have it there all the time adds a constant reference point for the other scenes as well as giving a practical solution to a knotty staging problem. There's not much money in the JTU budget but I don't necessarily think that's a bad thing as I think that means the theatre can present a lot more work and also, because the place is so flexible, it forces the design choices to be about that crucial relationship between the actors and the audience. So it's nice to make a big bold choice that's hopefully going to support the play.

#### **I was arguing with Polly that the play is voyeuristic and I think that if it's in the round that will add another element.**



I think the nature of voyeurism is that you can look without being seen but with this in the round you are implicated in the action. It's raw what you're going to see but you can watch the watchers and that's quite important.

The Royal Court often attracts a kind of 'well-heeled' audience and there is sometimes this cultural, social, financial gulf between the audience and the people on stage that has made me feel slightly uncomfortable, slightly weird, considering where it is and the people it attracts. So it's good territory to be representing such a middle / upper middle class family.

However, I think it's important not to get carried away with the class issue in relation to the play. It could easily turn into a flash point about the production which I'm anxious to avoid. I think the job of drama is to provide an opportunity for an audience to empathise and I think that there's an interesting challenge in this play in that we don't often see this class represented in such a savage way. It's quite a brutal exposition of some of the typical values of that class and the emotional shortfall that can follow. You don't want to generalise about the class itself because they are all individuals but I think it's interesting territory that's going to be uncomfortable for an audience of whatever class.

### **Do you agree that the play could be about a family who are not so middle class?**

Yes. This stuff goes on – addiction, lack of parental responsibility, the borders being blurred between children and parents. The difference with *That Face* is that there's money behind this family. Sadly most people don't have that privilege. In this play money replaces love a lot of the time or love is expressed through money. It allows people to avoid their responsibilities even more. (LM perhaps it allows some dignity) Yes, Martha's going to go to a rehab clinic that someone's going to pay for and it may or may not be successful. There was an interesting moment we discovered in rehearsal this morning when we came to the bit with the cat food. Somehow it seems so symbolic of a middle class nightmare that they've been reduced to eating cat food. She hasn't eaten the cat food but it's a really interesting little turning point which clearly identifies that they are products of a social background. I think it's funny. . . I think the audience will be shocked. (LM I think it would be awful in any background) yes I think it would but you hear stories of people eating cat food (LM do you?!) yes it's a symbol of impoverishment and here it is happening in this swanky flat in a lifestyle that is well-funded. It's something ironic and amusing that it's this symbol of poverty that gets Henry upset. A lot of the undercurrents of the play concern appearances and what is socially acceptable.

### **What do you think are the themes in the play?**

Well it's a play about family, about what we think families should be and about what our families really are. It's about boundaries and the blurring of boundaries it's about how money can replace love, and it explores what happens to people when they have to take on too much responsibility too young. I think there's a shadow around the play about people making choices in their lives without really owning those choices, about them being ignorant of their own deeper motivations and how that ignorance perpetuates a destructive cycle of behaviour.

### **Polly thinks it's about responsibilities and love.**

Yes. It's about love and how love gets a bit twisted in certain circumstances and how those natural boundaries between parents and children can be eroded. What's interesting to me is how important it is not to be simplistic about the drug and alcohol addiction of the mother. That actually those are symptoms of . . . the character could be self- medicating, she is trying to sort out this hole that she's got inside herself and that's probably from a genetic/ family continuum. A sense of depression maybe bi-polar and the alcohol just exacerbates the problem. It is not a play about addiction really. Those issues are expressions of this problem that the whole family share and that the parents have created in the dynamic between themselves. Henry is trying to do the right thing but actually he's doing all the wrong things. The most difficult thing for him to do is walk away from Martha and leave her to her own devices. Sadly he's too young to know that and anyway, they have created this co-dependency that makes it impossible for him to leave...

### **What preparation have you done?**

Well I'm familiar with the class of people so I've thought a lot about my own past and the people I've known. I've done a lot of research into alcohol dependency, I've done anecdotal research into girls boarding schools and their lives and I've thought about the character's strategies and those transactions we have when we become parents no matter who we are talking to: the psychoanalytic system of 'transactional analysis'. . . that has been quite useful. But most of the work I've done has been delving into the play and seeing how its internal logic works. And talking to Polly a lot - that's the best preparation you can do when you're directing a play – listen to the writer and work out what she is really trying to say and let that guide you.

### **What methods do you use in the rehearsal room?**

On this one I'm going to do a lot of improvisation concentrating on the back stories. I want to look at what they have shared in the past so that we all have a very real sense of what it was like before the father left so that when we do the scene when he comes back we all know what it was like when he left. What it feels like. So we're going to try and create a reality of the offstage events.

Basically at the moment we're going through the play and looking individually and collectively with Polly not just intellectually but actually having a sensation of what it was like for example when Hugh left or when the cleaner was fired. It's an attempt not to generalise, not to assume that we have this shared understanding but when you start to break it down we get a greater sense. So anyone who is talked about in the play we'll have a picture of them on the wall in the rehearsal room so we are all visualising the same thing. Its just about a way of giving the actors the confidence to play the part of the longer story, something that's been going on for a number of years and I hope it will have a knock on effect in making the work and the choices the characters make more complex. I think it would be a mistake to be reductive – they're as complicated as you or me and as soon as you start asking questions about why certain behaviours have cropped up a whole therapeutic process goes on and so we want to be really deep and detailed about all of that stuff.

**Polly was talking about the fact that Martha's depression began when she had an awful pregnancy with Mia and that's why she hates her. I think it's interesting that Polly chooses not to write about this in the play apart from the moment when she says how perfect she felt when she was pregnant with Henry.**

Yes I think that's a perfect example of when we are given the tiniest reference in the play and it is important that we go back and explore what that's all about. And we'll probably go further back to Martha's relationships with her parents (LM Yes of course).

So those are the methods and then apart from that it's pretty traditional really, getting it on its feet and listening to the actors, finding out what they're thinking, and for me to find ways of supporting their performances.

**Do you work differently on other plays?**

I think that one of the joys of being a director is that your job changes – or it should do anyway - depending on who you're working with and what material you're working with. And if you don't you can miss the point. You're being asked to direct this play not any old play. I think it's useful and it's more interesting. What I think is important with this play is that the actors can play a sense absence when they're on stage, I want them to have a feeling within themselves of this other thing that they're missing, so when your Dad turns up and you haven't seen him for two years, it's really important to concentrate on that. It's almost like there's another play behind it which is when things weren't going wrong when things were ok.

**So do you think there were significant times in the world of the play when things were ok?**

I think they were manageable yes. Martha was probably always a bit of a livewire and that level of exuberance was acceptable in someone much younger, a bit of a party animal and they probably both had a good time. I think as life went on and there was more of a sense of responsibility the relationship degenerated and these things developed. This family though has serious problems at its heart, and the crisis we see has been waiting to happen.

**Do you see any particular challenges that you might face in directing this? (Like Henry having to piss himself every night on stage for example)**

Yes I think challenges like that are fun, working out how to do things but the main challenge you face is how to tell the truth, to get it right in terms of both the writers intention but also peoples' experience, the reality. I don't want to take short cuts to make it palatable or theatrically successful. I want to really engage with the audience. I think one of the ways is to stage it in a way that the audience can't avoid it because when some of the territory is harrowing people might instinctively look away if they get a choice and they might choose not to engage with it. I also think there's a sense of balance. This is a class of privilege and maybe the audience will be prejudiced in not giving much sympathy to the characters so I

feel a responsibility of making it so real that it should be like you are looking at those real characters, not a presentation. In a way it's a typical slice of life thing, but with a class of people that aren't usually represented that way.

### **Can you say more about why you think an audience might not want to engage?**

Because it's easier for them to engage with characters who are disenfranchised politically and socially, this theatre has a history of representing the underdog. What is difficult is here we are looking at group of people who on the surface have got it all. They're all good looking, they've got money, they're extremely well educated, whatever happens to them. What ever happens to them the members of that class are going to go on and be in charge of other sections of the population. They're going to own a certain amount of capital. They're going to have power. So I think rightly politically there is a resistance to empathise with these characters because in a lot of ways that class behave in hateful ways and their privilege represents a wider social injustice, but you could argue that they don't know anything about it, it's all socially determined and they are unaware of these issues but I feel we need to show it so truthfully that you have to engage.

### **It's the lack of love that we'll care about isn't it?**

Yes, we'll feel sorry for the kids. They continue the cycle – they're not goody-goody little victims, they are continuing it. Well Mia is anyway, she's a tormentor, she's a torturer, and Henry is his own worst enemy, bless him.

### **What did you want the audience to leave talking about?**

I want them to be engaged emotionally. I want them to try and understand what the characters are going through. I don't know. I don't mind so long as they are engaged. I imagine that they will be talking about loads of things that I won't have anticipated and that's all good. Hopefully the characters are going to be rich, I don't want there to only be one possible solution so that the audience is discussing the value of a private education for example. I hope that they are more blown away by what they have witnessed I hope they engage emotionally and they're a bit more sympathetic towards the characters. I think that's what it's all about, they've felt what it's like to be them for a bit, that's the role of drama.

If the revolution comes about as a result of it then that would be good but it's unlikely. It doesn't feel to me like a political play with an agenda apart from the point that everyone is worthy of empathy and understanding but then that's true about everything really. . .

### **Design**

Designer Mike Britton was inspired by Tracey Emin's 'My Bed'.

*Tracey Emin shows us her own bed, in all its embarrassing glory. Empty booze bottles, fag butts, stained sheets, worn panties: the bloody aftermath of a nervous breakdown. By presenting her bed as art, Tracey Emin shares her most personal space, revealing she's as insecure and imperfect as the rest of the world.*

*Tracey Emin was born in London, England in 1963. Between 1983 and 1989 she studied at Maidstone College of Art and then attended the Royal College of Art. In 1999 Emin was shortlisted for her works exhibited at Lehmann Maupin and Sagacho Exhibition Space, which showed her 'vibrancy and flair for self-expression' that revealed a 'frank and brutal honesty.*

*Tracey Emin makes paintings, drawings, prints and sculpture, as well as working in performance and installation, film, video, embroidery-collage, neon and written text. Critics have noted the wistfulness, poetry, humour and honesty that underpin the harrowing frankness and unreserved sexual revelation of her obsessively confessional works. My Bed, the work shown at the Turner Prize exhibition in 1999, graphically illustrates themes of loss, sickness, fertility, copulation, conception and death - almost the whole human life-cycle in the place where most of us spend our most significant moments.*

## **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 unusual and 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 a glimpse of her maternal capacity by the majority of the play involves 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 are 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 found both alcohol and prescriptive 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 of this play.

### **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 life-style 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 creates 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 school girl 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 worst 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 has informed Martha, but she cannot remember the conversation as she was drunk. Consequently the school has 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 the 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.

### **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 businessclass 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.