



Performance Studies

A LEVEL

**Performance Studies:
Shiobana Jeyasingh**

Topic Exploration Pack

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This activity offers an opportunity for English skills development.



Topic Exploration Pack – Shobana Jeyasingh

Shobana Jeyasingh is one of the practitioners in the Performance Studies AS unit G402, Performance Contexts 1.

This is a 2-hour written paper with questions on two different practitioners. One hour, therefore, is the optimum time for candidates to tackle Jeyasingh through a study of her works.

The specification says that candidates must study one work, the choice being left to the centre's discretion but it must 'demonstrate broad trends in the output of that practitioner' and 'comment generally on the relationship between the work studied and the practitioner's output as a whole.'

Questions test knowledge and understanding in one or more of the following:

- structure and form – how Jeyasingh organises materials within her work and the effects this organisation produces
- elements of the performing arts – how she exploits action, motifs, relationships, dynamics, space and other dance elements and the links across the art forms
- performance techniques – what approaches and specific skills performers of her works adopt in performing her dances
- stylistic influences – how she is influenced by and her work is informed by the styles of other practitioners, genres and cultures
- contexts - how she explores, reflects and is influenced by social, historical and cultural contexts.

This pack is designed to introduce teachers and students to Shobana Jeyasingh for preparation for G402 or any other exam, stand-alone study or as part of wider drama and theatre studies.

Biography

Students often think that a practitioner's life story will tell them all they need to know. Certainly it's helpful to understand that she was born in 1957 in Madras, Southern India, spent time in Malaysia and Sri Lanka, is fluent in Tamil and English and is an expert in the classical Indian dance style of bharatanatyam.

Since 1988 she has run her own dance company and is based in London, where the cultural and ethnic diversity of the capital is popularly assumed to inspire her and is reflected in her work.

She rejects the word 'fusion' to describe the work as it implies two things coming together. She argues that her work derives from a myriad of influences, styles, structures and forms.

Some label her work as 'about her being the Indian woman in Britain who engages with questions of migrancy, diaspora, race and heritage', whilst forgetting the power of the dance and her as a 'composer of movement.'

While some teachers may feel she is not widely known so may not be a suitable choice for a dance practitioner study, in fact her repertoire is fascinating and rich material in its own right but is also the springboard for studying wider performing arts in Asia, for instance.

Therefore an overview of her life and her catalogues of works is a good starting point. After all, artists are products of their times and are influenced by a wide range of events, people and circumstances in a lifetime.

Prior Knowledge

The assumption is that students will have a working knowledge of the elements, vocabulary and practice of dance, of improvisation and of physicality with a view to developing a devised performance or a repertoire piece to the stage. They will be at ease using compositional dance devices.

Familiarity with solo dance, canon and unison, levels and how music informs dance and vice versa, is basic. Some knowledge of late 20th Century choreographers will be helpful.

Some social, cultural and historical contexts in the Far East are worthwhile learning. Borneo, Brunei, Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia, China including Hong Kong and Taiwan, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Laos, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines and Vietnam are the countries that could be included, each with a rich history and culture of dance, drama and music – the performing arts.

From Kabuki and Noh plays, Javanese puppet theatre to the gamelan and mime to the Beijing Opera, the sources for ideas are endless, and in Jeyasingh's word, 'myriad.'

Dance writer Sanjoy Roy has said that her choreography is 'about form, structure, the shape of movement, the qualities of the medium. In short, it's modernist.' Others feel that her mixing of styles and genres, using film footage as background, specially commissioned music and reinterpreting classical ballet movement makes her a postmodernist.

Teachers will find it helpful to use practical examples and dance improvisation to support the study of her actual works where they are available to see performed.

For preparation of the written aspect, previous questions and mark schemes provide a solid training base applicable to exam or analysis of plays.

Sources of Information

The most comprehensive book on Performance Contexts 1 is '*Performance Studies for A Level*' by John Pymm, Gail Deal and Mark Lewinski, Hodder Education (2008) ISBN: 978 0340 967 539. Published in association with OCR this book demonstrates how to teach the other units of Performance Studies A-Level too.

Shobana Jeyasingh's website should be the first port of call. <http://www.shobanajeyasingh.co.uk/> followed by her dance company site <http://www.shobanajeyasingh.co.uk/company/>

Dance writer Sanjoy Roy has written about Jeyasingh many times. What is her choreography about? <http://sanjoyroy.net/1997/09/multiple-choice-shobana-jeyasingh/>

Article by Sanjoy Roy in The Guardian about her 2015 work, 'Bayadere – The Ninth Life' about female temple dancers of South India. <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/mar/24/shobana-jeyasingh-bayadere-the-ninth-life-contemporary-dance>

An interview with Shobana Jeyasingh (1998) <http://sanjoyroy.net/1998/11/elephants-and-mayflies/>

BBC Radio 3, Under the Influence, Jeyasingh talking about her influences (from 2011.) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00zt79r>

Royal Opera House, favourite Jeyasingh YouTube clips. <http://www.roh.org.uk/news/watch-our-favourite-shobana-jeyasingh-clips>

Bharatanatyam information site. <http://www.bharatanatyam.nl/>

Glossary of Indian Dance. <http://rangashree.org/indian-dance-glossary.html>

'Faultline' is available on DVD (2007), featuring two full-length versions of the piece.

'Surface Tension' (2005) DVD, has interviews, discussions and the work itself.

Postmodernism made simple and study pack.

<http://www.bookrags.com/Postmodernism/#gsc.tab=0>

Teachers will find a useful way of evaluating performance is through reviews of her work. One such is by Sanjoy Roy about Palimpsest. <http://sanjoyroy.net/1996/12/form-and-flux-shobana-jeysingh/>

The Works

Jeyasingh has produced over 50 works with a list at

<http://www.shobanajeysingh.co.uk/works/complete-works/>

The most well-known are:

'Surface Tension' (2000), a piece about 'the surface' and how we perceive things and people tending to disbelieve what they see. She worked with dancers to find a movement vocabulary. In bharatanatyam and classical ballet, vocabulary is set and learned. In contemporary dance, new vocabulary is created for each piece.

In this, she suggested sentences and paragraphs and then phrases and dates to manipulate through dance movement. Classical moves may be used but are changed/manipulated.

For the music she collaborated with Kevin Volans who created rhythms and cross rhythms in one section and spaces and silences within another.

'Transtep' (2004), a collaboration of choreographers about collisions and meeting points which explore themes of distance and proximity.

Faultline (2007), the still current debate about Asian youth.

'Bruise Blood' (2009), a young black man in the 60s was wrongly arrested.

'Just Add Water' (2009), based on people's obsession with cooking and cross-cultural eating.

'Configurations' (2012, updated from 1998), revisiting the past and taking a bold step into the new.

Approaches

For exploring Shobana Jeyasingh teachers could either choose a series of extracts or go for one full-length work to explore.

Any CD of the music of her collaborator Kevin Volans or of one-time collaborator Michael Nymans is the best way of giving a framework for practical dance exploration, without tying a practical session to a particular work. Some of Steve Reich's minimalist music is equally helpful.

In this order the easiest way to approach the teaching is:

- Background including biography
- Cultural, social and historical contexts of the work
- Stylistic influences
- The storyline in summary (if there is one)
- Key themes
- Performance style(s)
- Any collaborators.

As well as a study of theory and factual information, practical work is particularly important. Students should be asked to experiment with the broad brief 'devising in the style of Shobana Jeyasingh.'

Small groups trying ideas and interpretations should be followed by sharing and peer assessment. If each sharing is videoed, it provides a diary of progress for later evaluation. This should be followed by more focused and polished performance with students taking it in turns to direct each other.

It is useful to teacher and peer assess the group polished performances, perhaps using the G404 repertoire mark scheme from 2011 onwards. www.ocr.org.uk/i-want-to/download-past-papers/

Teachers will take every opportunity to see any live Jeyasingh work being presented locally. Occasionally the arts programmes on TV may feature some aspect of her work.

Lesson Activity 1

Warm up:

Students undertake a standard dance lesson warm up, either teacher or peer led.

Discussion:

Show the YouTube video demonstration of bharatanatyam

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jctdyc2GqQE> The teacher leads class discussion on the style, dance elements, impact of music, costume, facial awareness of the performer. This is the first love and starting point of Shobana Jeyasingh.

Improvise round a theme in the style of Jeyasingh:

The given starting theme is 'Killing Me Softly'. Each group is given a long trailing scarf that can be played with to represent love and euphoria or dark menace and imprisonment or murder.

Students are asked to imagine being temple dancers. They will need to establish one or two simple motifs to support an interpretation as the scarf moves from something soft and sensuous to something dark. They shouldn't let a narrative follow from this.

Students need to consider compositional devices such as mirroring, floor work, unison, fragmentation, counterpoint, canon, repetition, deep knee bends, contact work and both straight-back and fluid torsos.

After about 20 minutes, students are introduced to a teacher-chosen track from Michael Nyman, Steve Reich or Kevin Volans which will further develop the movement and interpretation they have created so far.

They are being asked to devise a piece in the style of bharatanatyam, but altered in a postmodernist way to explore a single item – a headscarf.

After a further 20 minutes, the teacher asks each group to share their work in progress. This is the point at which teachers may want to video work to play back sections to aid analysis.

The teacher leads a discussion that considers what further could be/could have been developed. Pose questions such as - would a backdrop of images have added anything? Are any other interpretations possible?

Plenary:

The lesson has been about applying some postmodern reinterpreting and manipulating techniques to a devised dance using a simple idea of affection becoming evil.

Lesson Activity 2

Students are asked to bring to the lesson two clips each of Jeyasingh pieces, which the teacher plays to the class. The teacher brings in some clips of the work of other contemporary choreographers.

Discussion:

Teacher leads discussion on the following questions:

- What are the different views of the same piece of work in performance terms?
- Can anything be learned from looking at extracts by other practitioners?
- How far does the music enhance the piece, if at all?
- What would be the effect on a dance piece of different music?
- Is the dance piece directly influenced by or from one cultural tradition?
- Is it the product of a myriad of cultural influences?
- Does it entertain and inform?
- What particular performance skills do the dancers have to use?
- What are the motifs and what do they say to the audience?
- Is there a predominance of one part of the body being used and why?

Ask students to use their knowledge and these examples to verbally answer the sample question:

‘What are the approaches and performance techniques required to bring together a range of cultural influences on a piece of dance?’

Deconstruction:

The teacher explains that taking a performance (play, book, dance, song, painting) apart to consider its meaning is called deconstruction. A postmodernist would put it back together again perhaps altering particular parts of it.

Practical:

Ask students in small groups to experiment deconstructing one small section that they have seen to make it something else, yet keeping most of the integrity of the original.

Plenary:

This session has been about developing ways of analysing dance techniques, intentions and performance skills.

Lesson Activity 3

From the OCR archive of previous questions and mark schemes. www.ocr.org.uk/i-want-to/download-past-papers/ teachers prepare sets of questions to use in lessons over a period of time after devising around themes/issues and after practical exploration of text(s) has given students familiarity with the work.

First step:

Take two questions from the archive and teachers talk them through. Are they focused primarily on contexts, stylistic influences, performance techniques or elements of the performing arts? Ask students to work through and make planning notes in pairs.

It's essential that students appreciate while every question has a focus, it cannot be answered well without including something from each of the main focus points. For example, it's hard to talk about a Jeyasingh work without using dance elements, knowing what influenced her and the social, political, historical and cultural contexts in which she choreographed.

Second step:

Take another pair of previous questions, repeat the approach. Teachers then ask students to draft out a response to one question.

Third step:

The teacher marks the responses and students mark each others simultaneously by reference to the Mark Scheme.

Fourth step:

Repeat with a different set of archive questions, never giving more than two question choices at a time.

Fifth step:

Students are asked to sit in exam conditions and answer one question from the archive they have not yet seen and in an hour only.

These should then be teacher and peer marked against the relevant Mark Scheme.

Student Sheet 1

Adapted from the Performance Studies Mark Schemes:

Jeyasingh's fingerprints

- Jeyasingh uses a stylistic approach that reflects the diversity of contemporary London (mainly), mixing contemporary dance with bhararatnatyam and other dance styles she has encountered in her life
- uses non-narrative, multi-layered choreography and a wide range of dance compositional devices
- uses strong relationships between dance and music to develop ideas
- uses a variety of music to extend the movement
- uses occasional filmed backdrops in a postmodernist fashion
- uses other choreographers and musicians to collaborate with in devising new material
- uses some recurring themes, such as migration, identity, cross boundaries and journeying and obsessions with things.

QUESTION: Are there any trademark fingerprints you have identified in a Jeyasingh piece you have studied that are not included above?



Student Sheet 2

Quality of Written Communication (QWC)

If Jeyasingh is being studied for a written assessment, the quality of the written English will play an important part. In Performance Contexts 1, for example, Knowledge and Understanding is worth up to 24 marks, while QWC could gain 6 marks per question. That 20% of the mark could make a difference of a grade in the exam.

Dos

- Do spell her name correctly, Shobana Jeyasingh.
- Do give her works titles initial capital letters. Surface Tension, Astral Shadows.
- Do make sure you have read and understood the question. It will never ask you to write all you know about Shobana Jeyasingh.
- Do use performance-specific words correctly.
- Do use examples from sections of works studied to support what you are saying, but make them relevant and not just something you have memorised to suit any occasion.
- Do use references from other practitioners, commentators, songs, films that are relevant to support your response to the question.
- Do you have a sense of Jeyasingh's repertoire, even though you may have only closely studied one play?
- Do make sure you are writing about something that is intended for performance to a live or recorded audience, not an abstract piece of movement theory,
- FINALLY, do plan your time carefully. If you have an hour, jot down a plan. Opening should be relevant and get into the question. Conclusion should be a short, sharp wrap-up.

Don'ts

- Don't call her Shobana. In an essay she is Jeyasingh.
- Don't spell incorrectly any words given in the question.
- Don't use etc, it is meaningless.
- Don't use textspeak or unnecessary abbreviations such as &.
- Don't open an essay with a long-winded biography unless it's helpful in answering the actual question.
- Don't write a conclusion which merely repeats what you have already said.
- Don't write extensive rambling sentences and/or paragraphs.
- Don't make sweeping statements and generalisations that are not backed up.
- FINALLY, don't use a formulaic response in which you end every paragraph with repeating the question and think you have answered it.



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