

SPOTLIGHT ON *ROSÉLISKA*

EXPLORE THE PLOT,
CHARACTERS AND
STAGING OF THE PLAY

While being held as prisoners of war at Portchester, two members of the theatrical troupe wrote a three-act melodrama, *Roséliska*, which was performed in the keep on Friday 2 November 1810. Find out more about the production below.

THE HISTORY OF MELODRAMA

Melodrama is a genre of theatre, known for its exaggerated character types and sensational plots, which originated in France and became popular in the 18th and 19th centuries. After the turmoil of the French Revolution, French theatre-goers wanted to see plays that displayed extreme emotions, with clear storylines set in a traditional past, and happy endings in which good overcomes evil. Actors used exaggerated body language, facial expressions and speech, alongside heightened dialogue. Audience members often reacted to what was happening on stage by cheering, booing and gasping.

Melodrama translates as ‘music theatre’. Live music, played by an orchestra, was used to communicate the tone of each scene, highlight the entrances and exits of certain characters, support long movement sequences and create special effects, for example to evoke the sound of a storm outside.

The genre also thrived in Britain. Under the 1737 Licensing Act, only two theatres in London could stage ‘serious productions’. Melodrama, despite often dealing with serious themes and real-life topics, was not seen to be ‘serious’ due to the way it was staged. It therefore was an alternative to the ‘serious productions’ of the main London theatres and could be staged anywhere.

As the genre developed, it became common for melodrama storylines to include six stock characters: the mean villain, the sensitive hero, the persecuted heroine, the simpleton, the faithful friend and the villain’s sidekick. As melodramas at Portchester were performed by an all-male cast, female characters were allocated to the men considered to be ‘fair of face’.

SELF-LED ACTIVITY

MAKING A MELODRAMA



Recommended for

KS2–4 (History, Drama)

Learning objectives

- Gain a practical understanding of some key elements of melodrama plays (plot, characters, costume, acting style, language and music).
- Create a character, costume and script in the style of 19th-century melodrama.

Time to complete

Up to 6 hours of study (you could do this as 6, 1-hour lessons over the course of a term)



Students from Bay House sixth form taking part in a melodrama workshop at Portchester Castle in 2019.

SUMMARY

Follow our step-by-step guide to explore the conventions of 19th-century melodrama and apply this understanding to make a melodrama scene from scratch. There are six steps to follow. This could be done as a scheme-of-work or extended project. You could complete one step per lesson, building up to a performance at the end of term.

STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE

First, we recommend you read the information about melodrama in the 'Spotlight on *Roséliska*' section of this pack (on page 28).

Next, follow this process to help students make their own melodrama scene. They should work together in teams of three. The Teachers' Notes on pages 41–43 go into more detail about how to carry out each of the six steps:

- 1) Plan a plot.
- 2) Develop a character.
- 3) Design a costume.
- 4) Create a scene.
- 5) Extension: add some music/sound effects.
- 6) Perform to an audience.

It may be possible for us to arrange for your students to perform their scenes in the theatre at Portchester Castle. To enquire about this opportunity, please contact our Education Bookings Team either via bookeducation@english-heritage.org.uk or on 0370 333 0606.

MORE LEARNING IDEAS

Students could create a poster/playbill to advertise their melodrama production to the local community. Include details about: the title of the play, the venue, the date and time of the show, plus the cast. For inspiration, look at posters from pantomimes that have recently been performed at a local theatre.

MAKING A MELODRAMA

TEACHERS' NOTES

Before carrying out these activities, put students into groups of three. They will work together on some parts of the process, and individually on others.

1) PLAN A PLOT

Work together to invent a simple 'good overcomes evil' storyline with three stock characters (hero, heroine and villain).

- a) In their groups, ask students to discuss examples of stories they already know where good overcomes evil, e.g. fairy tales, nursery rhymes, comic books, superhero movies. What do they all have in common? What makes them unique/different?
- b) Introduce the three characters: hero, heroine and villain. Ask students to list some typical characteristics for each.
- c) Ask students to choose a simple setting for their story, e.g. a castle, a haunted house, a rural village, a hotel. If they intend to perform at Portchester Castle, they could use the site as inspiration for the setting.
- d) Now get the group to think of a scenario that might happen between the three characters, in their chosen location. This should follow a clear structure:
 - i) Provocation: something annoys the villain and they come up with a nasty plan.
 - ii) Problem: the villain carries out their plan and the heroine is put in danger.
 - iii) Penalty: the hero steps in to solve the problem and the villain is punished.

Students should discuss the above as a group and, once decided, commit their storyline to paper.

2) DEVELOP A CHARACTER

Use freeze frames, hot-seating, writing-in-role, plus voice and movement exercises to explore each character.

- a) Before students can begin acting, they need to decide who will play each character. It seems that the theatrical troupe at Portchester Castle considered the attributes and strengths of each prisoner when casting them in a role. There were only male prisoners at Portchester in the period 1810–14, so men played female characters. Encourage students not to make casting decisions based on gender alone, because we no longer have the same casting restraints as they did in the past. Students should think about which character they would be best suited to, regardless of gender.
- b) Next, ask students to create a freeze frame (or tableau) of their chosen character. They should now exaggerate their posture on a scale of 1–10, with 1 being the least energy they can put into their embodiment, and 10 being the most. Explain that communication of character through exaggerated physical gestures is central to the melodrama acting style.

- c) Now ask each student to sit in a chair (the 'hot-seat') and have the two other group members ask them a series of questions about their character. They should stay in character and improvise their answers in the first person. It doesn't matter if they make up something random when put on the spot; it isn't set in stone and can always be changed later! The interviewers should start simple with simple questions such as 'What is your name?' and 'How old are you?', building up to deeper questions such as (to the heroine): 'How did you feel when the hero rescued you?'.
- d) Get each student to select a key moment for their character, from the plot they invented earlier, and write a diary entry about it, in character. 'Writing-in-role' will help them to explore their character's thoughts and feelings in response to a crucial part of the story.
- e) Ask each student to select one line from the diary entry they have just written. They should read this aloud, with whatever voice comes most naturally. Now read the same line three more times, experimenting with different vocal deliveries: accent, pitch, pace, tone and volume (remembering that the acting style in melodrama is exaggerated instead of naturalistic – they might feel a bit silly, but that's okay!). Next, add two or three gestures to help them to communicate their character's thoughts and feelings more clearly. They can now perform this line to their group and get some feedback, remembering it's all a work in progress.

3) DESIGN A COSTUME

Work on your own to research some melodrama costumes worn on stage in the 1800s and design a suitable costume for your character.

- a) Provide students with some historical context: the costumes worn on stage at Portchester Castle in the 1800s were designed and made by the prisoners. Students should first look at the costume illustrations in Source Group 4 (on page 22) and read the accompanying character descriptions. These were costumes used in melodrama productions in Paris that the French prisoners in the theatrical troupe would have seen and been inspired by.
- b) Discuss with students what the costumes might tell us about the character and how far the costumes suit the character descriptions. Questions could include: Do you think the character is wealthy? Can you tell what kind of thing the character does for work or as a hobby? Are they old or young? Are they a good character or an evil one? How do you think they would walk and talk in this costume? Ask students to explain their answers.
- c) Next, students should write down five statements about their character that might influence how they dress. Now they know what they want to communicate to the audience through the character's costume, they can have a go at designing it.
- d) Ask students to show their work to a classmate, in a different group, who is performing the same character as them. Analyse what the costume shows about the character and evaluate how successfully it does this. Could anything be changed or added to communicate the character's traits even more clearly to the audience?

4) CREATE A SCENE

Work as a team to stage a moment of conflict between the three characters.

- a) Use improvisation to explore a moment of high drama in the plot. The middle section of the story might lend itself best to this, i.e. when the villain carries out his nasty plan and the heroine is put in danger.

- b) Next, use rehearsal time to refine this scene and get it ready for performance. It will start as something quite rough, which changes every time the group runs through the scene, but will eventually become more consistent, with students picking the best bits and developing it until the scene becomes more slick and able to be repeated. It's up to you how much rehearsal time is needed, based on how the groups are getting on.

5) EXTENSION: ADD SOME MUSIC/SOUND EFFECTS

Use music/sound effects to support the stage action.

- a) Explain that live music, played by an orchestra, was used in traditional melodramas to communicate the tone of each scene, highlight the entrances and exits of certain characters, support long movement sequences and create special effects, e.g. to evoke the sound of a storm outside. Use the musical excerpt provided in Source Group 4 (on page 23), as an example.
- b) Depending on ability levels, and resources available, students could do one of the following, to add extra layers of meaning to the scene they have created:
- i) Compose a piece of original music.
 - ii) Make their own sound effects using musical instruments or everyday objects.
 - iii) Find and use pre-recorded sound effects.

They should try to include at least three sound effects or pieces of music in their scene, e.g. when the villain enters some tense music could play, or when the heroine is thrown to the ground a crashing sound could be heard.

6) PERFORM TO AN AUDIENCE

This is what it has all been building up to! You could do this at school or on the stage in the recreated prisoners' theatre at Portchester Castle. If you're interested in this opportunity, contact our Education Bookings Team to make arrangements, via bookeducation@english-heritage.org.uk or on 0370 333 0606.