2020 VCE Drama written examination report

General comments

In 2020 the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority produced an examination based on the *VCE Drama Adjusted Study Design for 2020 only*.

The examination comprised two sections:

- Section A – questions assessing students' skills in analysing and evaluating a production from the 2020 Drama Playlist (Unit 3, Outcome 3)
- Section B – questions assessing students' skills in analysing the development and presentation of an ensemble performance (Unit 3, Outcome 1) and a solo performance (Unit 4, Outcomes 1 and 3).

It is important that all students:

- ensure that they know the difference between play-making techniques, dramatic elements, production areas, expressive skills and performance skills
- understand how actors manipulate the convention of application of symbol to communicate ideas and themes through action, gesture, language, vocal or facial expression, object/props, costume, set pieces or heightened movement
- have a clear understanding of the techniques used by actors to transform between characters, times and places; for example, through snap transitions, morphing expressive skills, giving and taking, action and reaction, use of production areas, use of a sound/word, use of an action or gesture, use of heightened language, and repetition
- have depth of knowledge about a range of conventions and performance styles
- understand the difference between analysing and evaluating (analysing means to examine in detail to discover the meaning of something; evaluating means to make a judgment about or critique something)
- use pertinent examples
- provide clear and concise answers to the questions
- carefully label their response as being continued at the back of the answer book when using the extra space provided
- use drama-specific language and terminology appropriately.

Specific information

Section A

This section relates to the Unit 3 analysis of a play. Due to restrictions forcing most of the plays on the 2020 Playlist to cancel, the question asked students to identify a production they had seen live or pre-recorded and provide the title of this play. There were many and varied productions listed, among the most common were recordings of *Hamilton*, Malthouse Theatre's *Away* and *Billy Elliot* and responses to the only playlisted play that managed a complete season, the Arts Centre's production of *Black Ties*.

Question 1a.

Marks	0	1	2	Average
%	2	30	69	1.6

This question asked students to describe how one of two performance skills, focus or energy, were applied in a specific moment in the production cited. Stronger responses to this question clearly identified a specific moment and how actors demonstrated either careful focus through implied character, or the manipulation for the audience's attention, or the actors demonstrated the use of energy through the intensity of the performance, often identifying differing levels of energy within the moment and the effect these gave. Weaker responses just described the actor's use of focus as staying in character, with little detail to help explain how this was done, or energy was confused with mood. Weaker responses identified when the performance skill was applied but not how.

Question 1b.

Marks	0	1	2	3	Average
%	2	7	31	60	2.5

This question asked students to explain how an actor or actors in the chosen production applied one or two expressive skills (voice, gesture, movement and facial expression) to represent a character. Stronger responses tended to provide several specific details of how an expressive skill was applied (for example, facial expression using the mouth, eyes and cheeks). Weaker responses lacked specific details or examples, or confused the actor with the character they were playing.

Question 1c.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	Average
%	3	2	15	42	24	14	3.3

This question asked students to evaluate the way actor(s) manipulated one convention (techniques or devices incorporated into the style of a performance) and one production area (costume, lighting, make-up, mask, props, puppetry, set pieces, sound design, theatre technologies) in the performance they saw. Students generally responded well to an analysis of the manipulation of a convention and a production area, but many did not effectively evaluate. Students were required to make a value judgment or critique the performance, using appropriate language to discuss what is effective, confusing, successful, or disappointing, etc. Stronger responses used evaluative language throughout the response and made appropriate use of well-articulated examples. There were quite a lot of excellent analyses, where students were able to write about how the convention was manipulated and how the production area was used in sophisticated ways but appeared to forget to include any evaluation. Weaker responses often confused conventions with dramatic elements or were unable to specify the way production elements were applied.

Section B

Question 1

In this question students were given a single stimulus image and asked to consider its dramatic potential in devising an ensemble performance. The main focus for the stimulus was to apply the convention of symbol in the devising process. The question provided both an image as well as some suggested titles, but no characters, themes or scenarios were given. The image of a trunk evoked a range of ideas, both as a literal and symbolic reference. Most students found the stimulus accessible and were able to develop ideas that allowed them to consider the symbolic connections prompted by the image.

The students were instructed that their devised performance may reflect one performance style or draw upon conventions from a range of performance styles and be eclectic in nature. They needed to consider how the ensemble group of actors would work through the process of play-making and select appropriate conventions to create a specific and intentional impact upon an audience. The students were informed that the devised ensemble performance may be performed in any venue or space that supports the communication of the idea(s) and/or theme(s).

The question required students to draw from the knowledge and skills acquired in Unit 3. The question allowed students to demonstrate their understanding of the play-techniques of brainstorming and improvisation, the application of conventions of a specific performance style and the manipulation of production areas to apply symbol.

Students needed to ensure they had read and understood the entire question before commencing any response, in order to recognise how each part of the question may develop or connect with a previous part. Stronger responses clearly recognised the creative journey of devising that the question encouraged and made deep connections early with the potential in the stimulus.

Question 1a.

Marks	0	1	2	3	Average
%	1	3	18	78	2.73

Students were asked to apply the play-making skill of brainstorming to explore the symbolic ideas associated with the image of the trunk. Students were provided with a space to demonstrate their approach to brainstorming. This was confidently handled by the majority of students. The better responses made clear how the symbolic ideas were generated in the process of the brainstorm. The weaker responses had one or two words, loosely related to the image, but with no symbolic reference.

Question 1b.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	Average
%	1	9	39	35	16	2.57

This question asked students to make use of their brainstorm to develop the characters for the devised ensemble. They were required to select an idea from the work generated in the previous question, then develop this idea by using improvisations to develop characters for the ensemble. Students were asked to describe how they would apply the play-making technique of improvisation. This question was not confidently handled overall. Stronger responses ensured they gave clear descriptions of the improvisation activity, which developed character and made specific and direct use of the idea they had selected from the previous question. Weaker responses did not address all components of this question or provided generic

descriptions of the purpose of improvisation or character traits, but not drawing these ideas together. The discussions were often unclear and lacked the description of how the actors would apply the improvisation.

Question 1c.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	Average
%	2	2	16	30	24	18	8	3.55

This question required students to devise a scene that communicated a selected idea from their brainstorm to create a specific and intentional impact upon the audience. The students had to decide on one performance style to use in creating this scene and state the performance style chosen on the exam.

The question then asked students to analyse how the actors in the ensemble group apply two conventions from the selected performance style as well as the dramatic element of mood to create this specific and intentional impact on the audience.

This proved to be a reasonably complicated question, with several parts to be considered. The better responses were able to clearly analyse how the selected idea will be communicated to the audience and what the effect would be. High-scoring responses were cohesive in their analyses, addressing all aspects of the questions in a logical and articulate way, which made it easy to imagine the mood and appreciate the way the conventions would affect an audience. A great many responses needed more explanation to get into the higher range, or more pertinent explanations to demonstrate their ideas. Weaker responses were missing aspects of the question entirely or failed to convey the intention of the question, which was how their idea would make a specific and intentional impact on the audience.

Musical theatre appeared to be quite a common performance style selected for this question, possibly because *Billy Elliot* and *Hamilton* were studied, however few students were able to articulate in any detail how conventions such as song and dance could be applied beyond a generic description of actor's singing and dancing. Generally, the students were comfortable identifying a performance style and most selected appropriate conventions of that style. Low-scoring responses confused conventions with dramatic elements.

Question 1d.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	Average
%	3	6	32	38	20	2.66

The challenge for students in this question is to be able to clearly explain how two production areas are applied symbolically, and what the meaning of the symbol the actors create, is. This proved to be reasonably confidently handled, perhaps because the idea of expressing symbolic meaning was a recurring topic throughout Question 1.

Again, students were rewarded for providing pertinent examples of how the actors would use the production areas to apply symbol. Stronger responses spelt out how the production area could be endowed with symbolic meaning rather than assuming that a symbolic feature would be easily understood by the audience. Lower-scoring responses required further explanation as to how the ensemble used the production roles to apply symbol, as they tended to assume the assessor understood the symbolism. In this question there were quite a few responses which did not address all aspects of the task, such as only explaining about one production role rather than two.

Question 2

In considering Question 2, students have six images to study as stimulus from which to create a solo performance that focuses on the exchange between two characters. The question provides students with the linear process of devising the characters through the application of expressive skills and play-making techniques, with a focus on the conventions of transformation of character and place. Students need to consider how two performance styles may be used in their solo performance to engage and affect the audience in specific and intentional ways. Students are asked to apply their understanding of performance skills and dramatic elements within the process of creating the characters. The performance had to use a single clearly lit space with no changes to the lighting grid.

Students were required to draw on the key knowledge and skills in Unit 4, where they are asked to develop and evaluate their own solo performance. In order to respond to all these questions comprehensively, students need to read the entire question and appreciate the procession of activities and idea development within each part. Students are asked to consider the details within the stimulus, explain how performance and expressive skills can be explored through improvisation, and understand how these skills can be applied in symbolic ways. Students were asked to detail the process of character transformation and the transformation of place and analyse how conventions are applied to impact on an audience.

As with Question 1, students needed to consider the whole question as an entirety before responding. High-scoring responses demonstrated that students had taken time to consider the stimulus choices carefully and provided themselves with solid ideas for characters as well as logical and appropriate performance styles and conventions, with which to address each question with clarity and detail.

Question 2a.

Marks	0	1	2	Average
%	1	10	89	1.88

Students were instructed to select and scrutinise one of the six images provided as stimulus. They had to identify the image by number and then, after examining the image closely, identify a specific detail from this image, to form the basis of their primary character. They were instructed to write this specific detail down on the exam.

In the first question, students were asked to briefly describe the primary character they have considered from the detail selected in the stimulus image. The majority of students had no problem doing this and ensuring the description of this primary character was clearly linked to the stated detail. Lower-scoring responses did not make the link between the chosen detail of the image and the character clear.

Question 2b.

Marks	0	1	2	3	Average
%	1	11	45	43	2.29

This question invited the students to describe how the actor will apply the expressive skills of voice and/or facial expression to create the primary character, described in Question 2a. This was a very accessible question but required students to provide reasonable details to ensure the qualities of the voice and/or the facial expression were described appropriately. Responses that provided appropriate terminology to describe the qualities of the voice and/or facial expression, including pertinent examples, received higher marks. Responses that were satisfactory but did not receive full marks, described the character's voice as being loud or having an accent or facial expressions to show anger, but without explaining how the actor achieves this. Weaker responses were brief and failed to explain how these expressive skills were used to create a character.

Question 2c.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	Average
%	1	7	29	33	20	10	2.91

In order to answer this question, students needed to select a secondary character from the stimulus images, although they did not have to acknowledge which image they had chosen. The task required that this character be different to the primary character. The question is complex in that students needed to explain the process of creating this character using improvisation, but ensuring they refer to the actor's use of the performance skill of energy and the symbolic use of the expressive skill of gesture. Highest-scoring responses were able to address all aspects of this question through a clear explanation of how the secondary character would be created using improvisation, and how energy and a symbolic gesture would be utilised in this process. These responses relied on accurate descriptions of a pertinent example of the improv activity and the way energy and gesture would be explored for this character through this activity.

Most students provided adequate responses, but these tended to provide a description of improvisation or a description of energy or a description of symbolic gesture without bringing them all together succinctly.

Lower-scoring responses provided confusing narratives, indicating that these students did not understand the question.

Question 2d.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	Average
%	3	13	33	32	19	2.52

This question required students to describe the transformation process from the primary character to the secondary character during an encounter. It was important, for a high score, that the description was from primary to secondary and not the other way around. The question provided some options for this encounter, which included a conflict or a collaboration. The description of the convention of character transformation, which may be described in terms such as morphing/melding, snapping, giving and taking, action and reaction, use of production areas, use of a sound/word, use of an action or gesture, use of heightened language, and repetition, must also describe the application and manipulation of one or more dramatic elements, such as conflict, contrast, climax, mood, rhythm, sound, space or tension.

The higher-scoring responses understood the importance of describing the transformation in appropriate language and allowing the two characters to be visible by their expressive skills in the description. Many chose conflict or contrast as obvious and logical dramatic elements, but some students found the opportunity to be more creative with sound and rhythm.

Weaker responses tended to not address all aspects of the question, did not use appropriate terminology, confused the dramatic elements or needed to provide clearer descriptions.

Question 2e.

Marks	0	1	2	3	Average
%	6	32	40	22	1.76

This question focused only on the secondary character and asked students to explain how the actor would create clear and contrasting locations through the use of the performance skill of timing. The majority of students gave a satisfactory response to this question, although the better responses had clear examples of how timing was used to denote the transformation of place (for example, soundscapes that created place, or movement through different environments). Students who did not get full marks for this question inevitably did not address all aspects of the task, or they needed to provide more information to make the contrast clearer, through the use of timing. Many gave very generic answers and tended not to evoke an application of timing that would clearly communicate to an audience that there was a change in place.

Question 2f.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	Average
%	6	7	18	30	21	13	5	3.14

The final question asked students to consider the effect their performance will have on an audience. Students were asked to state the intended impact. In order to show how they would intend to create this effect on the audience, the students are asked to select two performance styles and a convention from each, for the actor to use. Students needed to analyse how the actor will use these conventions to create the stated impact on their audience. Better responses clearly described specific applications of the convention within the solo performance and were able to analyse how this application had an impact on the audience. There were quite a range of styles and conventions. Theatre of Cruelty was very popular but tended to be poorly applied. The convention of direct address was also popular. Many students could describe two conventions. Higher-scoring responses made deliberate choices about the right convention for the intended impact. Weaker responses often selected conventions that had no real advantage when conveying the intended impact. This suggests that students who were confident in applying a range of performance styles were better equipped to address this task.