

Drama

Amang the Crows

Learning and Teaching Guide

[INTERMEDIATE 1;
INTERMEDIATE 2]

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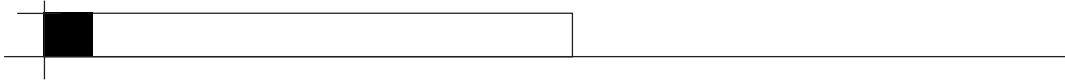
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Introduction

These support notes are issued to supplement Charles Barron's playscript of *Amang the Crows*, first published and distributed to schools and colleges by Learning and Teaching Scotland in 2005.

Charles Barron is an experienced playwright and teacher of drama from the north east of Scotland. Further information about his work is available from www.CharlesBarron.co.uk. *Amang the Crows* was published in a volume containing two versions, one in Doric Scots (the language of Buchan and Aberdeenshire), and an accompanying translation in standard English. The notes that follow in this set of resource notes refer to the original Doric version.

Amang the Crows has a setting that alternates between a prison in the USA and the rural community of North East Scotland fourteen years earlier. It shows us how Donnie Finlayson, a former farm labourer from Scotland waiting to be executed in the electric chair, came to be a condemned murderer, and who is really to blame for the murder he committed.

It deals with very adult situations which absorb, and yet disturb, the audience in a positively challenging way.

This guide is aimed at Intermediate Drama students, but it could easily be adapted to assist in the learning of Higher Drama students for Contemporary Scottish Theatre.

I wish to thank Caroline McDougall Roy without whom I could not have written this guide.

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General notes on *Amang the Crows*

Setting

- Eight scenes are set in prison, in the USA; seven scenes take place in the living room of a small farmhouse, in the North East of Scotland.
- The scenes cross continually between the two settings and both will be visible to the audience at all times.
- The play covers two different time periods – one day in Scotland, and the last hours of Donnie in prison, set 14 years later.

Set, props, lighting, sound and costume

- The set design, by necessity, is fairly clearly tied to the structure of the play. While most of the action takes place in Scotland, as there are continual cuts to the USA involving the same characters, both sets must be permanently shown on stage. There is no requirement for the design to be representational; however, certain pieces are essential. There must be at least two chairs for the prison; and the farmhouse has to show a kitchen area with at least two exits/entrances. There is availability for designers to allow more symbolic or suggestive elements to be used.
- Some props are essential, such as the bacon, the scrubbing materials, the shopping bags.
- Lighting is very important as it has to clearly show the difference in setting and atmosphere of the two stage areas. It is through lighting that the scene changes have to be most clearly defined.
- Sound, while not specified, will add to mood and atmosphere. It would also be useful to suggest the activities that happen off stage both in Scotland and in the USA.
- The style of costume used is important, for while modern in its setting it should reflect Donnie's narcissism, Linda's comparative wealth, the fastidiousness of Maggie, and the comparison between the other women in the play. Obviously the costumes will also show a clear comparison between the time and setting in Scotland and the USA. This must be kept fairly basic due the number and frequency of scene changes between these two settings.

Language

- The language is realistic – of the Doric tongue or Scots dialect from the North East of Scotland.

- Both Donnie Finlayson and Greg Andersen will introduce an American accent, with Donnie's being a mix of Doric and an American inflection in the USA scenes.
- No specific state is mentioned, but the accent should be compatible with a state that operates the death penalty through use of the electric chair (the South or Mid West perhaps).

Stage directions

- The writer is fairly specific in the USA scenes as to how Donnie should move.
- He gives clear indications of how scenes should be paced – *Pause* and *Linda shakes her head* and *Silence*.
- He offers informal stage directions such as – *Cheerfully* and *Complacently* and *Uneasily*. This allows the actor some understanding of the author's intention for the mood of the moment.
- There are some further detailed indications of specific reactions and movements so as to leave the director/actor with no ambiguity about how to present a scene – *She breaks down and cries quietly* and *She helps herself to a rasber... she bites*.
- There are details of physical description which will offer a clear indication to the actor about how to move – *There are bruises on her (Linda's) face and the way she is holding herself suggests that she has a great deal of pain elsewhere*.

Acting style/techniques

- Although these are far from ordinary situations, they are real and the people involved are ordinary folk, so a naturalistic and realistic quality to the acting might add a depth to the performance and the message.
- All the dialogue has a naturalistic style, even though the setting/direction can suggest a non-naturalistic form, e.g. the prison scenes with Donnie re-enacting the rape.
- There is a definite comic timing needed between certain characters, especially Meg and Iris, so as to offer some pathos to the main action of the play.
- The split set will offer an almost constructivist (or non-realistic) nature to the performance, balancing the naturalistic style of the dialogue.

Actor/audience relationships

- The actors maintain 'the fourth-wall' concept throughout.
- Through the split set and the continual switching of time frame between the fourteen years separating Scotland and the USA, the audience is continually reminded that this is a staged piece.

- The audience will be unsettled by the switch between the very intense, emotional and upsetting scenes and the humorous banter that follows through other characters' lack of knowledge of events.
- By the end of the play, the audience should also be left with a sense of horror at Maggie's culpability; it is a slightly chilling realisation.
- The intensity of some of the required performances by the actors will also pull the audience into the play, though they will be aware that this is a construct.

Dramatic themes and ideas

- The play should challenge and disturb audiences.
- It raises key issues such as parent/child relationships, the extended family role, developing sexuality, abuse, bullying, violence towards women, capital punishment.
- In addition there are issues of class, the legal system, personal morality – ownership and responsibility.
- For many of the themes, Greg Andersen acts as a metaphor for the audience, allowing them a viewpoint to interpret events as they unfold. In many respects his role may be compared to that of the Greek chorus.

Relevance to Scottish society

- The play is about Scottish society, though the issues and themes developed in it have a wider relevance to the whole of western society. It appears to be seen through the eyes of Donnie, though by the intelligent usage of scene changes to the USA, it is also interpreted through the character of Greg. Some of the topics raised include:
 - Male/female relationships (lover/familial)
 - The rural economy
 - The role of family
 - Moral standards
 - Parent/child relationships
 - Class
 - Education

Target audience

- Scots, especially those from Doric-speaking backgrounds or areas.
- Young people who will identify with parent/child relationships.
- Those with concerns or interests on the subject of abuse.
- Those with concerns or interests on the subject of human rights.
- Those with concerns or interests on the subject of young people.
- Those with an interest in challenging ideas.
- The play is not suitable for a pre-fifteen audience, as it contains some very disturbing images.

Structure of the play

An overview

- The play progresses through two time periods, continually switching between the two, but both sequences being shown chronologically.
- There is a time gap of fourteen years between the two time periods.
- There are fifteen scenes, and the briefness of many of the US scenes creates a paced editing of an almost cinematic quality. The contrast between the scenes creates tension, anticipation and horror at the events as they unfold for the audience.
- There is no clear break in the play for an interval and it may work better without a pause. It is not a long play, so this should not be a difficulty for an audience.
- Although the play focuses outwardly on the events surrounding Donnie, it is actually just as much about his mother Maggie and how she has caused her son to be the way he is. But it does this without diminishing Donnie's own responsibility for his actions.
- There is no mention of Donnie's father in the play.
- There is a clear difference in the Scots' personal reactions to events and those of the American (Greg Andersen).

Scenes 1 and 2*(Pages 14–19) Scotland/USA, Prison****Begins action/introduces storyline***

- Introduces audience to the split stage. Shows Donnie in prison, then contrasts the younger Donnie at home in Scotland.
- Donnie in prison.
- Greg Andersen introduced.
- Waiting for Donnie's mother is unusual, suggests something is different here.
- In scene 2, we are shown the hardness of Maggie: she is annoyed at Donnie's lateness.
- Maggie has thrown out Donnie's lunch because he is late home.
- The humour between Iris and Meg is also revealed. They are the counterpoint, the comic relief for the play.
- Introduces Maggie's control over Donnie and the hint that she is losing some aspects of that control.

Introduces characters

- We meet Donnie and hear about his mother.
- Scene 1 establishes the distant relationship between Greg and Donnie.
- We hear suggestions of the complex relationship between Donnie and his mother.
- Maggie's hard-line attitude is shown.
- Iris and Meg are revealed to be gossiping and conspiratorial behind Maggie's back, but humorous.
- Meg's contrast to Maggie (her daughter) in all aspects of their personality is clearly shown.

Scene 3*(Pages 20–26) USA****Begins main action and storyline***

- The real start of the action. We realise Donnie is in prison.
- The suggestion that this is more than just a prison sentence is shown although the 'death row' sentence is only hinted at.
- Donnie and Maggie's background is told.
- Donnie's childhood and upbringing are revealed.
- Donnie's selfishness is shown through his theft of the trainers.
- Maggie's support and lies on behalf of her son are told.
- Donnie's inability to 'believe' his own 'stories' – lies – is shown.
- Donnie has been convicted of murder.

- He set fire to his girlfriend and murdered her.
- Maggie does not condemn his actions, only his inability to convince the authorities of his lies.
- Maggie justifies his immoral actions.
- Donnie reveals that his mother has taught him to believe he is the most important person and to *force* others to accept this.

Develops characters and relationships

- Greg remains fairly distant and little about him is revealed. He appears as a cold lawyer.
- Maggie and Donnie's initial awkwardness is shown.
- Donnie's self-importance and arrogance is shown.
- Maggie defends her son.
- Their lack of any social morality and the ease with which they both lie to get their way is shown.
- Both Maggie and Donnie show very selfish characteristics.
- Donnie has a real need for Maggie's acceptance.
- Their cruelty and violence is shown, both in physical action but also in acceptance and conviction of their own sense of the rightness of their actions.
- Donnie and Maggie both reveal very unsympathetic natures. They come over as very unlikeable individuals.

Develops themes and issues

- Class/financial resentment of others
 - Donnie and Maggie believe he had the right to steal as he had less.
 - Donnie killed Marilou because he wanted her money for himself.
- Morally corrupt
 - Donnie and Maggie believe he was right to kill Marilou.
 - They both resent the fact that he was caught out in a lie, but are indifferent to the fact that he lied and committed murder.
 - Maggie blames Greg for Donnie's conviction, not Donnie for his actions.
- Violence towards women/abuse
 - There is a lack of remorse for Marilou's painful death, a tacit acceptance of it.
- Parent/child relationships
 - Maggie's upbringing of Donnie to regard himself as superior to others no matter his actions is shown.
 - Maggie's unstinting support for her son.
 - Maggie's inability to be impressed by Donnie, as he continually seeks her approval.
 - Maggie still offers simplistic, yet cold advice to him – *You shouldn't have paid any attention.* (Page 26, middle.)

Scene 4*(Pages 26–33) Scotland****Develops action and storyline***

- Linda comes looking for Donnie.
- Maggie distrusts Linda.
- Linda reveals Donnie is working extra hours at the farm and that they are going into town together.
- Donnie and Linda appear to be starting a relationship.
- Iris and Meg like gossip and to ‘wind up’ Maggie.
- Linda first begins to realise that Donnie might be spoilt and that his mother can be a very tough-minded woman.
- Linda is revealed to be of a different social class to Maggie.
- She is also revealed to be Donnie’s employer’s daughter.

Develops characters and relationships

- Linda and Maggie distrust each other.
- Everyone is aware that Linda is of a different social class to the others.
- Iris and Meg are gossips.
- Maggie likes to be in control.
- Maggie mothers her son as a younger child than he actually is.
- By working extra hours, Donnie has disturbed the household routine – and Maggie’s in particular.
- Donnie is a labourer and employed by Linda’s father.

Develops themes and issues

- Parent/child relationships
 - Maggie overly ‘mothers’ Donnie.
 - Meg relies on her daughter (and grandson) to help her.
 - Maggie is very protective of her son in front of others.
 - Maggie has expectations of Donnie that he must meet.
 - Maggie is threatened by another woman in her relationship with her child.
- Class resentment
 - Maggie distrusts Linda, especially when her background is revealed.
 - Linda is very aware of her social upbringing.
 - Linda’s *way of speaking* is held in contempt by Maggie.
- Developing sexuality
 - Maggie is suddenly faced with a woman and a stranger who represents her son’s interest in the opposite sex.
 - Maggie starts to recognise that Donnie’s developing sexuality is the potential start of a distancing between them.

Scene 5*(Pages 33–37) Scotland****Develops action and storyline***

- Donnie reveals he was sent by Maggie to America.
- Donnie is being sent to ‘the chair’ for execution.
- Donnie blames Linda for his predicament, as does Maggie.
- Donnie’s suppressed anger is revealed.
- There is sexual violence in Donnie’s actions, suggesting that more is to be revealed about his relationship with Linda, though the audience is not yet given all of that information.
- Greg is blamed for Donnie’s conviction.
- Maggie and Donnie try to convince Greg of their ‘stories’ – their lies.
- Maggie and Donnie’s inability to accept the moral responsibility for their actions in society is shown.

Develops characters and relationships

- The violence and sexually violent nature of Donnie is clearly shown.
- Maggie has no moral centre, except in protecting her own flesh and blood.
- Greg shows moral repugnance and dislike for Donnie and his actions.
- Donnie has no awareness of the consequence or guilt of his actions.

Develops themes and issues

- Violence towards women/abuse
 - There is further acceptance of Donnie’s actions to Marilou.
 - There is a suggestion of sexual violence to Linda that is as yet unrevealed.
 - Donnie shows his uncontrolled violence to Greg.
 - Both Donnie and Maggie refer to Linda getting what she deserved.
 - Greg shows his horror at how Donnie could kill Marilou.
- Capital punishment/legal system
 - Donnie refers to the ambiguity in the US legal system through some states not having the death penalty.
 - Greg states his view that Donnie deserves his conviction.
 - Greg comments on his need to defend Donnie even though he knew Donnie was lying.
- Parent/child relationships
 - Maggie automatically starts to support Donnie’s lies even to his lawyer, who knows the truth.
 - Maggie ‘sent’ Donnie away to the USA for his own protection.
 - Maggie cannot stop herself from lecturing and questioning Donnie as if he was only a child – especially when asking him why he stayed in a state that has ‘the chair’.

Scene 6

(Pages 37–48)

Develops action and storyline

- Reveals Linda to be an independent-minded woman, in contrast to Donnie who is dominated by his mother.
- Donnie returns home to explain his lateness and attempts to organise everything.
- Maggie offers to cook Donnie more food.
- Meg's desire to annoy her daughter is shown.
- Meg tells of how Maggie was as a child, and shows her own independence from her daughter.
- The easy, almost childish humour of the two older women, Meg and Iris, is clearly shown.
- Linda admits she likes Donnie.

Develops characters and relationships

- Maggie's domineering nature over Donnie is revealed and contrasted with Linda's relationship with him.
- Iris and Meg are united in their humour over Maggie.
- Linda is uneasy with Maggie.
- Donnie is very confident in his family and almost oblivious to Maggie's domination.

Develops themes and issues

- Class
 - Maggie is further dismissive of Linda and her background.
 - Donnie seems oblivious to the social status of Linda at this point.
- Extended family
 - Meg reveals her parenting of Maggie.
 - Maggie's desire to control both her son and her mother.
- Developing sexuality
 - Donnie clearly shows his attraction to Linda
 - Linda reveals a less intense interest in Donnie, yet reveals a desire to ingratiate herself with Maggie.

Scenes 7 and 8*(Pages 49–62) USA/Scotland****Develops action and storyline***

- Donnie's sexual violence to the chair is shown briefly, representing Linda.
- Meg and Iris reveal they still don't truly 'know' Donnie, even if they have known him all his life.
- Linda emphasises she is only getting to know Donnie.
- We are told that Maggie dotes on Donnie and that women are viewed as less important than men by Maggie, Meg and Iris.
- Linda's shock at the sexism revealed starts to make her question her involvement with Donnie.
- Linda dislikes Donnie's vanity and arrogance.
- Donnie forcefully and unsubtly shows Linda his attraction to her.
- Linda shows her lack of attraction to Donnie.
- Eventually Linda leaves Donnie to go into town herself. Donnie goes after her.
- Meg and Iris eat the bacon made for Donnie, presuming the two have left together.

Develops characters and relationships

- Maggie's smothering of Donnie is further revealed.
- Donnie is vain and full of his own self-importance.
- Donnie seems to feel all women should be attracted to him.
- Linda decides that Donnie is too full of himself and too sexist.
- Iris and Meg continue their 'double act' of humour and gossip-mongering, providing the contrasting light relief in the play while still making serious revelations.

Develops themes and issues

- Developing sexuality
 - Donnie reveals a lack of understanding and an immaturity in relationships through his own self-obsession and lack of consideration towards Linda.
 - Linda's experience and independence make her choose to reject Donnie.
- Parent/child relationships
 - Maggie goes to make Donnie food, she dotes on Donnie – *Her loon's athing tae her*.
 - Meg acts almost like Maggie's naughty child even although she is Maggie's mother.
 - The way female children and male children can be treated differently by parents is shown.

Scenes 9 and 10*(Pages 62–72) USA/Scotland****Develops action and storyline***

- In America, Donnie challenges Greg to pay money to his mother.
- Maggie says she will leave America in the morning.
- Greg blames Maggie for how Donnie has behaved.
- In Scotland, Iris and Meg have eaten all of Donnie's food.
- Donnie returns home, having been left by Linda.
- Maggie convinces her son to go after Linda, that he is better than her.
- The story of Maggie convincing Donnie to buy a bicycle reserved for another boy is told.
- Donnie goes after Linda, having been goaded by his mother.
- Meg and Iris leave, after Maggie lectures her own mother.

Develops characters and relationships

- The condemnation of Greg is shown, with Donnie and Maggie blaming him and trying to dominate him.
- Donnie's lack of confidence is shown.
- Maggie reveals the hardness and the extreme dominance of her character.
- Meg and Iris continue to show their childish humour at the manner in which Maggie tries to control them.

Develops themes and issues

- Parent/child relationships
 - Maggie continues to dominate and control Donnie.
 - Meg shows her submissiveness to Maggie's dominant character.
 - Donnie's reliance on and enthrallment with his mother, in spite of all her moral failings, continues.
- Personal morality
 - Donnie and Maggie want Greg to pay for Maggie's travel since he failed to obtain an acquittal.
 - Donnie and Maggie do not accept that he was found guilty because he was guilty.
 - The total lack of social morality is shown through the treatment of Philip Cheyne, and Maggie's condoning of Donnie not only taking the bicycle but hitting the boy.
- Violence to women
 - Maggie's dismissal of Linda's desire not to be with Donnie, encouraging him to go after her because he wants her: his wishes are more important than hers.

Scenes 11 and 12

(Pages 73–83) USA/Scotland

Develops action and storyline

- Donnie seems to rape a chair, calling it ‘her’.
- Linda returns to Maggie’s house looking dishevelled.
- Maggie reveals that while a man hitting a woman is not right, it is acceptable in her opinion.
- Linda reveals that Donnie has raped her.
- Maggie threatens Linda not to tell anyone or she will accuse Linda of provoking the attack.
- On hearing Maggie has threatened Linda, Donnie is relieved, and he shows no remorse.
- Maggie tells Donnie he has to escape to America as Linda will eventually tell.
- Meg suspects something has happened but doesn’t know what.

Develops characters and relationships

- Maggie shows an intense cruelty, coldness and hardness towards Linda, and towards women in general.
- Maggie shows she will do anything for her son.
- Donnie is never condemned by his mother, but protected by her right or wrong.
- Linda is physically and emotionally scarred, probably permanently.

Develops themes and issues

- Violence towards women/abuse
 - Donnie (in prison scene) shows extreme anger and misogyny.
 - Maggie dismisses the violence her son has committed on Linda.
 - Linda is raped.
 - Maggie only protects her son, and never condemns the rape.
 - There is no remorse from Donnie, only fear of being caught.
 - Linda is blackmailed.
- Parent/child relationships
 - Maggie, while telling Donnie what Linda has told her, protects him and decides for him what he shall do. Donnie accepts her decisiveness, showing excitement.

Scenes 13–15*(Pages 83–92) USA/Scotland/USA****Develops action and storyline***

- Maggie reveals to Greg how she falsely accused one of Donnie's teachers, in order to remove him. This was because he had caught Donnie stealing and realised Maggie was the real problem.
- In Scotland, Iris and Meg discuss having seen Linda.
- They are aware that all is not right but don't know why.
- In the USA, Donnie knows he will die but seems proud it will make him famous.
- Greg realises the mother is the truly guilty one.

Develops character and relationships

- The true corruption of Maggie is shown.
- Meg and Iris reveal their disquiet about what is happening, but also their lack of true awareness.
- Greg realises and states that Maggie is the cause of many peoples' suffering.

Develops themes and issues

- Personal morality
 - Maggie is shown to have no guilt and a total lack of morals.
 - Donnie reveals his shallowness and lack of any moral base through his pleasure at being made famous through his execution.
- Parent/child relationships
 - Maggie's total defence of her son even when he is wrong and has badly wronged another person.
 - Donnie's complete enthrallment with his mother reveals her ultimate culpability for the events.
- Legal system
 - The revelation that through the media, guilt can be given a form of status and fame.

Contemporary Scottish Theatre themes

For this play, the most appropriate area of study is 'Issues of Gender'. There several key themes within this that can be looked at in detail.

Issues of gender

- Sexual development of characters
 - Donnie is infatuated with Linda.
 - Maggie is threatened by the presence of a 'new', younger female in her son's life.
 - Iris and Meg's interest shows an almost voyeuristic element to the potential relationship between Donnie and Linda.
 - Donnie's deep immaturity and lack of awareness in speaking to Linda.
 - Linda's growing disillusionment with Donnie, as she sees how he truly is in his own home.
 - Donnie and Maggie's inability to understand that Linda is not interested.
 - Donnie's violence towards Linda, and lack of remorse.

- Violence towards women/abuse
 - The casual disregard for life evident in Donnie's murder of Marilou, and his justification for his actions – which are supported by his mother.
 - The violent scene viewed by the audience that Donnie enacts on the surrogate Linda (the prison chair).
 - Maggie and Donnie refer to Linda getting what she deserved.
 - Maggie's belief that Donnie 'deserves' Linda. She is seen as an object to be possessed by him.
 - Maggie suggests to Linda that she should accept that men hit women. This is previously suggested as acceptable with all three older women informing Linda that men are superior to women.
 - The raping of Linda and her description of how Donnie forced himself on her is the most stark example of violence toward women in the play.
 - The way that Maggie attempts to blackmail Linda into being quiet is also a form of abuse and condones the acceptability of violence to women.

- Mother/son relationships
 - Maggie has devoted her whole life in a completely obsessive way to Donnie – *her loon's athing tae her*.

- Maggie’s failure to judge moral rights and wrongs when defending her son.
- Her failure to instil societal values in her son.
- His continual seeking of approval by his mother while she steadfastly never offers her full approval unless he is doing *exactly* as she demands.
- Maggie maintains a cold aloofness from her son. There is no evidence of warmth or love between the two of them.
- Maggie continually lectures and dictates to Donnie.
- She overly mothers – indeed almost smothers – him in the way she treats him. While calling him a man, she treats him as a child that still has no control or self-will. In many ways she actively connives to keep him at this stage, which is why he ultimately lacks any self-control in his behaviour towards women.
- While acting in a dismissive way to Donnie, in front of others she is still fiercely protective of him.
- Maggie is unable to accept another woman changing her relationship with her son.
- Maggie and (through her teaching) Donnie are unable to see their culpability in the consequences of the actions they have taken.

In this play there are also some issues that are relevant in the area of ‘Social, Political and Religious Dimensions’.

Social, political and religious dimensions

- Capital punishment/legal process
 - Ambiguity of the US legal system is apparent, with capital punishment in some but not all states.
 - The issue of capital punishment being deserved is mentioned, but interestingly it is never developed.
 - The professional role of a lawyer as opposed to his personal attitude is compared and contrasted.
 - The role of the media in giving status to criminals is also touched upon in the play.
- Class/financial background
 - Maggie encourages Donnie to take, steal or bully people out of goods if they appear to have more wealth than he has.
 - Linda is held in contempt by Maggie, partly because of her social class.
 - Linda is very aware of her upbringing and the social difference between herself and Donnie and his family.

- Donnie is blind to the class difference with Linda because of his infatuation.
- Personal morality
 - Donnie sees himself as morally justified in murdering Marilou.
 - Both Maggie and Donnie show resentment that he was caught lying, not guilt that he lied in the first place.
 - Greg is blamed for not obtaining an acquittal. Donnie's own personal guilt is not considered by either Donnie or Maggie.
 - Donnie and Maggie try to lie to the lawyer, even though they know Greg is aware of the truth.
 - Donnie and Maggie believe the lawyer owes them (just as they believe society owes them) and that he should pay them.
 - Donnie boasts that not only did he cheat a boy out of his bicycle, but he hit him too. Donnie sees no wrong in this but believes he was justified.
 - Donnie shows excitement at the prospect of being killed as he will be on television. He shows no remorse.
 - Maggie has no feelings of guilt or sorrow or empathy towards Linda and her rape ordeal. She is cold and aggressive.
 - Maggie seems quite distant about what is going to happen to her son. She shows no emotion.

SECTION 2**Specific skills**

*Of the three units in Intermediate Drama, there are two specifically that this text can be used with. These are the **Production Skills Unit** and **Production Unit**. In addition, an extract from the play could be used as part of a prelim or practice paper for the written external examination.*

*The areas of study in the **Production Skills Unit** are then applied in a practical fashion for the **Production Unit**. Therefore the areas of study apply to both.*

Production skills

This is a general, simplified description of what each of the roles in a production team involves.

Actor

Performs plays in a suitable style, reflecting the ideas and themes of the play. The actor is under the charge of the director. Actors will need to keep notes on their interpretation of character, list their tasks and preparation and annotate their script with moves and directions.

Director

The director has the overall concept for the performance of the play. There are various different styles of directing from authoritarian to consensus style. The director has the 'vision' of the play, emphasising the key themes and ideas in the play. The director relays her/his ideas to be developed by all the other roles in the production team. The director will need to be a good and successful negotiator.

Set designer and deviser

The set designer researches and plans and often makes the whole set (the area that the actors perform in). The sets need to reflect the practical requirements of the play as dictated in the script. They also need to reflect the ideas and themes of the play as well as the style, period, setting and atmosphere. Their design should also be made in liaison with the director and match his/her requirements. The set designer and deviser need to create the stage set, or source materials for it. This may include the making of a model as well as drawings and ground plans of the agreed set design.

Lighting designer and technician

The lighting designer chooses the types of lights, with effects/colours to reflect the time/place of action. The lighting also has to emphasise particular moments, areas, create mood, tension and reflect the ideas and the themes of the play. This should be in consultation with the director and stage designer. They need to list their tasks and the preparation necessary and have an accurate lighting plot.

Sound designer and technician

All sound effects and music are the sound designer's responsibility. They must look at the requirements of the play in terms of content, style, period, atmosphere and setting. This should also be done in consultation with the director. They should list their tasks and preparation for their role, and their responsibilities, and have an accurate sound plot, including music (pre-show and incidental if used), effects and source, volume and duration of cues.

Costume designer and wardrobe manager

All clothing worn on the stage must be chosen/created specifically for the performance. It should reflect the style and period of the piece. It should reflect the design concepts as already discussed in consultation with the director. They need to keep notes and/or drawings to interpret the script. They should list their tasks and preparation for their role and responsibilities, and have final costume designs.

Make-up designer and artist

The make-up artist designs suitable make-up and hair for the actors to reflect their character, status, background and the themes of the play. They may need to consult with the director and the costume designer. They should list their tasks and preparation for their role and responsibilities, and have final agreed designs/charts for all character make-ups.

Props designer and manager

The person in charge of the properties (props) has to decide the specific requirements for these. They have to decide on which props are suitable and would enhance the production. They need to decide what style the props should have, in consultation with the designer and/or director and/or actors. They should list their tasks and preparation for their role and responsibilities, and have a master props list including all personal, set and costume props.

Stage management

The stage manager is in charge of the production while it is being performed. The stage manager needs to attend rehearsals and keep an accurate log of all movements, actor entrances and exits, all set changes, costume changes, lighting cues, sound cues, prop requirements and movements and any other important factors that may affect the performance. They need to co-ordinate all these details during the performance and ensure that all activities backstage are carried out efficiently, at the right time, and in the right order to allow for a smooth performance. They should list their tasks and preparation for their role and responsibilities, and have a prompt copy of the script which is neat and accurate.

Production skills analysis***Actor***

- What style of acting is suitable for this play, and why?
- What is the background, personality, attitude and interests of my chosen character?
- How is my character motivated?
- What is the role of my character in the play?
- What is my characters' relationship and feelings towards other specific characters in the play?
- How does my character progress and/or change throughout the play?
- How can I use my body language to portray this character?
- How can I use my voice to portray this character?
- How can I use gesture and expression to portray this character?

Director

- What are the key themes and ideas of this play?
- Which themes and ideas do I wish to emphasise to the audience?
- Who is my target audience?
- How can I use actors to communicate my directorial concepts?
- How can I use the space to communicate my directorial concepts?
- What and how can I use other dramatic elements to communicate my directorial concepts?
- What difficulties does the text offer in communicating my directorial concepts?

Set designer and deviser

- What set requirements are in the script for style, period, atmosphere and setting?
- What limitations/requirements does my chosen performance area have?

- What additional requirements do other production team members have?
- What research do I need to do for the style, period, atmosphere and setting?
- What requirements does the structure of the play give?
- What materials will I need to create my design concepts?

Lighting designer and technician

- What lighting requirements are in the script for content, style, period, atmosphere and setting?
- What limitations/requirements does my chosen performance area have?
- What additional requirements do other production team members have?
- What special effects are desired?
- What additional design style do I wish to apply to create particular periods, atmosphere, setting and mood?

Sound designer and technician

- What sound requirements are in the script for content, style, period, atmosphere and setting?
- What limitations/requirements in equipment/materials does my chosen performance area have?
- What additional requirements do other production team members have?
- What special effects are desired?
- What additional effect do I wish to create in terms of particular periods, atmosphere, setting and mood?

Costume designer and wardrobe manager

- What costume requirements are in the script for characters, style, period and setting?
- What additional requirements do other production team members have?
- What research do I need to do for the characters, style, period and setting?
- What requirements does the structure of the play give?
- What materials will I need to create my design concepts?

Make-up designer and artist

- What make-up requirements are in the script for characters?
- What additional requirements do other production team members have?
- What research do I need to do for the characters?

Props designer and manager

- What props requirements are in the script for quantity, style, period and setting?
- What additional requirements do other production team members have?
- What research do I need to do for the style, period, size and setting?
- How would I best organise all personal, set and costume props?

Stage management

- What requirements do the actors and the director require for rehearsals?
- What additional requirements do other production team members have?
- What requirements does the structure of the play give to allow for smooth operation of all the production skills?
- What requirements are needed to ensure that all members of the production team meet their various responsibilities successfully?

Examination of a key scene

Examine Scene 8, pages 50–62

Interpretation

- What does the initial dialogue about Donnie between Iris and Linda tell us about the feelings of each of them towards Donnie?
- What mood would you wish to create in the audience with Iris's line '*Bit w' Donnie I jist aye feels he's bein ower careful. He's aye watching...*'? (Page 51, top)
- Why does Linda say '*I'm not his lass*'? (Page 52, top)
- What is the significance of Iris's speech starting '*Na, na, na. That's just like playing wi' dollies.*' (Page 52, top)
- What effect will Meg saying '*I think so*' (and the previous conversation) have on Linda's feelings toward Donnie? (Page 54, bottom half)
- How does Donnie react to Linda's change of mood when he enters? (Page 55, top)
- Why does Meg ask Iris to help her make the bacon? (Page 55, bottom half)
- What is the difference in attitudes between Donnie and Linda when they discuss what to do? (Pages 56–57)
- How does Donnie feel when Linda says '*And the gear on*'? (Page 57, top half)
- What do you think Linda actually means by it?
- How does Linda start to feel about Donnie when he compares himself to the other workers? (Page 58)
- What changes in Donnie's reactions to Linda after he asks '*You got a boyfriend?*'? (Page 58, bottom)
- How does this make her feel? (Page 59)
- What do you think Donnie feels when Linda leaves? (Pages 59–60)
- Given Scene 7 before this, what do you think the audience knows about what will happen next? (Page 49)
- Iris and Meg's return seems to change the whole scene. What is the change of mood? (Page 60, bottom)
- Why do you think the author has done this?
- What is the significance of Meg's final line '*We nicht as weel sit doon, then. Linda's nae needin' that plate onywee*'? (Page 62)

Characterisation

- What is Iris's attitude at the beginning of the scene?
- How does Linda feel at the beginning of the scene?
- What is revealed about Linda's character and personality after listening to Meg and Iris?

- How does Maggie feel during the scene?
- How does Donnie feel when he enters?
- What emotional change does Linda experience for Donnie, as he talks about the workers?
- What is the change of mood between the two when Donnie asks '*You got a boyfriend?*'
- How does Linda feel when Maggie enters?
- How does Donnie feel when Linda leaves?
- What concerns Iris and Meg at the end of the play?
- What does this tell us about either Iris or Meg or both?

Audience reaction

- How will the audience react to Iris and Meg's speech with Linda at the beginning of the scene?
- How will the audience feel about Maggie after this speech?
- How will the audience feel about Donnie when he returns?
- What will the audience be expecting when Iris and Meg leave?
- How will the audience feel when Linda leaves?
- How will the audience feel during Iris and Meg's discussion about the bacon?
- How will the audience feel at the end of the scene and Meg's final line '*We nicht as weel sit doon, then. Linda's nae needin' that plate onywy'e*'?



SECTION 3**Acting roles*****Donnie Finlayson***

Donnie is often portrayed in the text as selfish and self-obsessed, but to categorise him as only this is to do a disservice to his character and to any actor wishing to portray him. Donnie, and therefore the actor, believes himself to be honourable. He treats his mother with respect, he acts in the manner that she has brought him up to believe correct. While we may view his actions with repugnance, he truly believes that the rest of society is wrong.

However, with all this in mind, his character flaws, lack of morality and lack of awareness of his own actions must inform the performer. Donnie has no respect of any sort for others. He believes himself to be superior. What Donnie desires, he believes he has a right to take. He has a self-righteous anger. In coping with his denial of events, Donnie has developed an almost compulsive disorder. Is this a device he uses to control his violence?

Indeed, Donnie has little control of himself in the American scenes and the difference between his attitudes in Scotland and the USA must be shown. Maggie had control over his anger, in part, whilst he was in Scotland. In the USA, fourteen years have passed. Donnie has become a man and without Maggie's controlling influence he has developed his own self-confidence and arrogance, and displays them even to her.

To balance this, he shows a protective care to his family in Scotland and also in part to Linda, because he is unsure about how to win her heart. He loses this softer aspect though when his own narcissism becomes evident, and the real Donnie that we hear about in the USA, is revealed.

His simplistic ignorance and denial of the events facing him must also be shown clearly, particularly at the end when he awaits his death almost with excitement. This ignorance should counterbalance both Maggie's coldness and Greg's horror and enlightenment regarding the reality of the two characters before him.

How would *you* interpret the character of Donnie?

- Would you try to make him a sympathetic character?
- How would you choose to play his narcissism?
- Would you be able to show his compulsive disorder and violence without resorting to a melodramatic style?
- How will you portray his love for his mother?
- How could his feelings for Linda be clearly developed in performance?
- How will you show the change in character and age between Donnie in Scotland and then fourteen years on, in the USA?
- What kind of voice would you want him to have?
- How much will his accent have changed in the USA?
- What physical stance and way of moving will you give Donnie?

Maggie Finlayson

Like Donnie, Maggie is a very difficult character to sympathise with in any way, but the actor must find a way into the character, in order to be able in some manner to identify with her. Although she shows immense cruelty, possessiveness and coldness, she believes herself to be a good person doing the best for her child. She is a dominating woman. She truly does believe that the end justifies the means. She cares deeply for Donnie and there is absolutely nothing that she would not do to protect her son if she had to.

She is also highly unlikeable as a character. She is without humour. She shows little respect for her mother and is dismissive of her. She dominates and controls her son. She lectures him and treats him like a child, even throwing out his dinner just because he is late home for the first time.

Maggie condemns Linda and is actively hostile to her, not only because she is a potential girlfriend to her son, but because of the status and place she represents and comes from. On top of this, Linda becomes the means that could bring about Donnie's downfall, by revealing he has raped her; and Maggie could never let any harm come her son. Maggie will protect her son at any price; Linda is left to pay the price.

While you cannot say Maggie is sadistic, she does appear to get some pleasure from her lies and from successfully deceiving others. She is cruel. She will not even accept Donnie's lawyer but attacks him for failing to save her (guilty) son. She cannot take criticism nor accept her culpability in Donnie's downfall. She is in denial and her lack of emotional response to Donnie's death sentence is all too clear.

How would *you* interpret the character of Maggie?

- How can you show any depth to her, and not just present her as a cold, two-dimensional caricature?
- How would you reveal her love for her son?
- How would you show her in denial to herself regarding the rape?
- How would you portray the change in attitude from before she knows about the rape, to when she realises what Donnie has done?
- How will you show both her annoyance at Donnie as well as her desire to defend him in front of others?
- What is the difference in how you will show her behaviour when she is alone with Donnie, and when others are there?
- How will you portray the character differences between Maggie in the USA and at home in Scotland?
- What physical and voice characteristics would you want to give her?
- How will you show her age and social background?

Greg Andersen

Greg is a lawyer. Greg is an American. These details could easily become two stereotypes. But Greg needs to show some depth. He has defended a murderer who has received a death penalty. What were his motives? Money, glory or a moral outlook that is against the death penalty? He never reveals this, though he seems to have made little money from the case and he also comments that Donnie deserves to die.

Greg is a voice for the audience. He shows increasing horror as he hears the stories of how Maggie has brought up Donnie and about the events that have led to Donnie's last night in prison. He seems to have some sympathy for Donnie at the beginning, but while trying to remain dispassionate and uninvolved, he cannot but help to be affected by Donnie's lies, violence, corruption and abuse. He no longer remains detached.

His final speech is possibly one of the most important in the play, as he reveals the true horror of Donnie as a victim.

How would *you* interpret the character of Greg?

- How will you make him professional and detached at the start, while not making him cold to the audience?
- How can you reveal his growing horror and anger without him becoming a caricature?
- How will you show his reaction to Donnie's intimidating physical presence in the prison?

- How will you use your physical movements to reveal his character?
- How will you use your voice, including your choice of accent, to successfully portray him?
- How will you interpret his final speech so that the audience is left with a sense of horror and realisation of what lies behind the events leading up to Donnie's execution?
- How will you ensure that the audience still accept him as a genuine character?

Meg Tarrant

Meg can be seen ostensibly as a comic character, for she brings some comic balance to the events in the play. She herself states that she tries to annoy her daughter Maggie, throughout the play. However, she is Maggie's mother and, as she reveals, she has a responsibility to how Maggie has come to behave in the way she does. So there is some guilt there. While Meg does not know what Donnie has done, and how Maggie has protected him, there is a suspicion in her mind too.

She can behave like a child and accept the way that Maggie treats her. It can appear that she is the daughter and not the mother of Maggie.

She is also selfish in that she eats the food of the household and uses Maggie and Donnie. She also pushes Donnie, Maggie and Linda for information and gossip and you have to wonder how harmless this is. Is there an element of voyeurism in her? She does seem to get some pleasure from the difficulties she causes. That said, she comes over as a much more sympathetic character than her grandson or her daughter.

How would *you* interpret the character of Meg?

- Would you play up the comedic potential of this character?
- How would you show the concerned, serious nature of her character?
- How will you show the mother/daughter relationship?
- How will you portray her relationship with Iris and the apparently conspiratorial aspect of this?
- How will your interpretation show her attitude to Linda?
- How will you use your physicality and voice to portray Meg?

Iris Leslie

Iris is a family friend who has known Donnie all her life. She acts as if a part of the family and treats the house as if her own. She is also wary of Maggie while in part trying to annoy her. She is fascinated by Linda and her relationship to Donnie.

Iris, like Meg, offers much of the comic relief to the play. She and Meg 'banter' in a form of double-act. It is also obvious that while having her own disquiet and nosiness about the goings-on in the household, she has a genuine affection for the family.

How would *you* interpret the character of Iris?

- How will you show Iris's place within the household as a non-family member?
- How will you interpret her age?
- In what way will you distinguish between Iris and Meg in their relationships and attitudes?
- How far will you play up the comedy aspects of the role?
- What level of seriousness and gravity will you bring to the character?
- What age will you interpret Iris as having and how will you show this?
- How will you show her attitude to Linda?
- How will you use your voice and physicality to portray Iris?

Linda Glass

Linda is the real outsider in the household and the threat to Maggie's life. Initially it is clear she has an interest in Donnie. However, as she becomes more and more aware of the hostility towards her from Maggie, and of the difference that her social background has on the others, this interest starts to wane. She obviously feels awkward about the questioning she is subjected to. She also wishes to control the situation more and Donnie's apparent lack of haste to accompany her shows her growing annoyance with him. His own preening and seeming inability to show her any real interest or concern turns her away from him. She also realises he does not have any empathy for her desire not to be with him.

From the start we have sympathy for her. However, it is when she returns to the household after Donnie has raped her that our horror and emotional empathy fully embraces her character. She is left in shock and disbelief after Maggie's reaction to her.

How will *you* interpret the character of Linda?

- How will you show her privileged background without making her appear to be spoilt or unpleasant?
- How will you use your voice and body to show her awkwardness?
- How will you be able slowly to reveal how her initial flirting with Donnie turns to dislike?
- How will you portray her defensiveness against Maggie's open hostility?
- After her rape, how will you show her emotional destruction in the telling of the events so that the audience is fully absorbed and emotionally engaged?
- How will you portray her reaction to Maggie's response?

SECTION 4**An interview with the playwright**

*You state in the introduction to the playscript your interest in the relationships between mothers and sons, and in particular the influence a mother has on what becomes of her son. How does *Among the Crows* differ or develop ideas from the body of your work?*

Maggie is a less attractive figure than most of my mothers, I think. Her concern for Donnie is really quite selfish; he represents something she has created and her passionate protection of him is possessive in an unhealthy way. As a result she hasn't noticed what kind of man she is making – self-centred, selfish and demanding. In *Guts*, on the other hand, the mother is more laid back, encouraging and supportive, pushing her son in the direction he wants to go. Yet it is clear that he wouldn't have gone anywhere without her prompting.

In *The Road to Missolonghi*, Byron's mother is an unseen character and her influence is seen through Byron's memories of her; he is angry with her, as he recollects her, and perhaps he even hates her but much of his behaviour results from this.

Did you find it difficult, as a male writer, developing a play that focuses both on female characters and also has a central storyline of violence towards women?

I have almost always focussed on women. Even in a play where the central character is male – *Clean Gyte*, for example – I am interested in how he affects the various women in the play. The physical violence towards a woman is something I haven't shown before and I deliberately avoided any danger of voyeurism by using the chair as substitute victim. Linda is a strong character, not a likely subject of abuse and I think this helps to put the emphasis on why Donnie behaves as he does rather than on the victim.

Are you concerned that some audiences may identify or even sympathise with Maggie or Donnie too much?

I would be concerned if anyone sympathised too much with these characters but I do expect audiences to feel an understanding of what

has made Donnie what he is and I suppose that means they feel some small measure of sympathy for him. I wouldn't want them to feel any sympathy for Maggie. (Though I have tried to hint at what has made her behave as she does; again, her mother is an important influence but this time Maggie has been reacting all her life against Meg's style of parenting.)

Could you explain how you developed the scene structure, alternating between the USA and Scotland?

It seemed the best way of showing both the influences and their effects, more or less simultaneously, though 14 years apart. I considered, but rejected, a more chronological approach, with all the Scottish scenes followed by all the American scenes. I thought that this would break the play into two halves and wouldn't bring out Maggie's influence so well. It would also have left the second half, the death row episodes, starkly without humour.

Did you have a target audience in mind when you first wrote the play?

Young people, certainly. But also a middle-aged Scottish group who might recognise characteristics in Maggie that they have seen in women of her period and age.

Do you have a preference for the Doric version or the English version?

The Doric. No question.

Do you feel strongly about the usage of Scots dialects in contemporary Scottish playwriting?

I do. There has been, because of the way theatre is organised in Scotland, an emphasis on the Glasgow dialect, so much so that actors from other parts of Scotland are forced to adopt a Glasgow accent to get work. Other dialects seldom appear on stage even though some – Highland, Doric, Borders – are spoken by large numbers of people. I hope the National Theatre will live up to its promise to be relevant to *all* areas of Scotland.

What's your view on contemporary Scottish theatre?

It's on one of its upward swings at the moment; there is a lot of good work being written and staged. Female writers – Liz Lochhead, Ann Marie di Mambro, Rona Munro – have had a huge influence in moving us away from the obsession with city violence that characterised so much of our output ten to twenty years ago. There are probably more young Scottish writers being discovered and produced now than at any time since the thirties. But theatre is still a minority interest as far as audiences are concerned. So the National Theatre has another crucial role to play here in developing an audience. That is as important as encouraging the writers.