Bringing historical characters to life

This lesson introduces some of the ways that theatre can give information to an audience about a character. It encourages pupils to closely understand how Treasure Island portrays some of its characters through costume, props, dialogue and physicality, and asks them to use these skills to invent a way of portraying a real historical character on stage.

Who is it for?

This learning resource is for pupils at Key Stage 2. It can be used to deepen a class' understanding of the History curriculum through introducing some fundamental concepts of Drama and Art.

Learning outcomes

Learners will:

- Be introduced to the way theatre communicates ideas through costume, props, and performance styles.
- Discuss how a specific character has been brought to life through these techniques.
- Re-examine what they know about a historical character.
- Create a way of bringing that historical character to life through theatrical techniques.

You will need

- Access to Treasure Island in the On Demand player
- The names of a small number of popular figures from history who your class will be familiar with

Activities

1.

Watch the scene "Meet the crew" from Treasure Island using the On Demand player. (26:05 - 28:10, 2 minutes and 5 seconds). In this scene, several characters are introduced for the first time. PLEASE NOTE: This scene contains one instance of bad language. If you would prefer not to use this scene as the basis for the lesson, it can be adapted to work with another scene of your choice.

2.

Assign every pupil a character from this scene – give one to pairs or groups of three if you're working with a larger class. The characters who appear in the scene are: Jim Hawkins, Dr Livesey, Squire Trelawney, Captain Smollett, Red Ruth, Lucky Mickey, Job Anderson and Silent Sue.

3.

Watch the scene again, and ask everyone to watch their character closely and write down what they learn about the character from that scene – and what feelings they have about that character. For example, are they strong? Brave? Shy? Silly? Scary? Do we know what their job is? Or something they particularly like?

4.

Share these ideas with the class and ask other groups to offer additional suggestions so that everyone has at least three things noted down about their character.

5.

Ask the class to suggest ways that the play might be informing them about their character – collect these suggestions together on the board. These should be things like what is said about them, how they speak, how their body moves, the clothes they wear, any props they carry, or even the lighting or music that's used.

6.

Ask each group to write the name of their character at the top of a piece of paper, and divide the rest of the page into six boxes: three on the left and three on the right. Above the first pair of boxes, ask them to write "costume and props", above the second write "how do they move" and over the third, "how do they speak".

7.

Watch the scene again and ask the class to make notes about their characters in each of those six boxes. In the left hand boxes, they should describe what they see - what costume and props the character is wearing, how they move, and how they speak. Then, in the right hand boxes, they should explain what those things tell them about the character.

8.

Ask each group to share what they've learned about their character and how it was communicated to them through the play. There aren't any right or wrong answers – even subtle suggestions or subjective thoughts, like "I thought he was scary", are fine – as long as the pupils can explain why they noticed them.

9.

Now give each group, or individual pupil, the name of a historical figure they will be familiar with. If they need it, you can ask the class to find out more about their assigned character as a homework assignment - focusing particularly on what kind of person they were: what work they did, how they lived, who they knew, and what kind of personality they had.

10.

Ask each group to come up with ways of presenting that character on stage using the theatrical elements they've already been observing. Drawing a new table like the one they made before, ask them to write down ideas for their character's costume, how they would physically behave, and one line that they might say.

11.

Ask members of the class to share their decisions about their historical figure with the rest of the class, and explain their choices.