

imitating the dog:
Excavating Hidden Stories in Classic Texts

Practical Exercises in the style of imitating the dog

Introduction

imitating the dog often describes its approach to adapting classic texts as excavation: digging beneath the official narrative to find what has been suppressed, silenced, or taken for granted. They ask who is missing from the story, whose perspective has been marginalised, what the text seems to be avoiding, and what hidden political or psychological tensions sit beneath the surface.

This approach connects directly to the company's use of screens and cameras. As Andrew Quick's essay on technology in ITD's work explains, the camera in an ITD production is often a metaphor for the selective process of narrative construction, highlighting the fact that every story is told from a particular angle, by particular people, with particular things left out of frame. The exercises in this document use that idea practically: students learn to find the edges of a story, inhabit the perspectives that have been excluded, and build new theatrical material from what the original text left in silence.

These exercises work as companions to the Adaptation Practical Exercises document. Where those exercises focus on the technical and theatrical vocabulary ITD uses (cameras, projection, fragmentation, visible mechanics), these exercises focus on the dramaturgical and critical tools: perspective, power, suppression, unreliability, and the ideological work that classic texts do.

They are particularly well suited to students working with the classic texts ITD has adapted (*Frankenstein, Dracula, Macbeth, War of the Worlds, Heart of Darkness*). The Gothic novels among them are an especially natural fit, but the exercises apply equally to any canonical text.

Exercise 1: The Silent Character

ITD connection: In *A Farewell to Arms*, the camera crews in ITD's production occupied a position similar to that of silent observers, present throughout, seeing everything, but not themselves the subject of the story. In *Macbeth*, ITD gave the Porter (a character who barely appears in Shakespeare) no equivalent, but the witches who operate the cameras occupy a similar marginal-but-significant position. Finding who is silent in a classic text – and giving them a voice – is one of ITD's core adaptation strategies.

Aim: Students identify a marginalised or silent character in a classic text and retell a key scene from their perspective, discovering what that shift reveals about the original.

Choose a scene from a classic play or novel. Working in pairs or small groups, identify:

- A character who barely speaks or appears only briefly
- Someone who is present in a scene but not its focus
- Someone socially powerless: a servant, a soldier, a bystander
- Someone whose inner life the text gives us no access to

Examples:

- The Porter in *Macbeth*
- Renfield in *Dracula*: present throughout, treated as comedy or horror, never as a person
- The servants in *A Doll's House* or *Hedda Gabler*
- The Creature's victims in *Frankenstein*
- Messengers and soldiers in Greek tragedy
- The Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*

Retell the same scene entirely from their perspective. What do they notice that the central characters ignore? What truths do they understand that the protagonists don't? What emotional world has been hidden?

Making challenge:
Stage the original scene – or part of it – while the silent character narrates live from the side, or via projected or recorded text. Their narration should not simply describe the action but interpret it, from a perspective that the original text doesn't offer. The two versions (the staged scene and the silent character's account) should be in tension with each other.

Reflection questions (for portfolios and written work):

- What did retelling the scene from this perspective reveal that the original doesn't?
- Why might the original text have marginalised this character?
- In ITD's *Macbeth*, the witches are both marginal figures in Shakespeare's original and the controlling perspective in ITD's version. What does that reversal mean?

Assessment objective: Edexcel: "explore how meaning in performance texts can be informed by social, historical and cultural contexts"; OCR: "historical, social and cultural context" of the practitioners' work.

Exercise 2: The Missing Scene

ITD connection: ITD's *A Farewell to Arms* spent considerable time on material that Hemingway's novel either skips over or describes only in retrospect – the texture of daily life between the major events of the story, the private world of characters at its margins. Its *Macbeth* added entirely new scenes that Shakespeare's original only implies. Finding what a classic text skips over – and asking why – is a core adaptation strategy.
Aim: Students identify a gap in a classic text's narrative and devise the missing scene, using it to reveal something the original suppresses.

Working in small groups, identify in your chosen classic text:

- A moment skipped over, where the narrative jumps across time without showing what happened
- An event only described or reported after the fact
- Something the text implies but never shows

Examples:

- Lady Macbeth alone in the period between her letter from Macbeth and his return home
- Mina writing privately in her journal in *Dracula* – what she doesn't tell anyone
- Victor Frankenstein during the weeks of the creature's creation – what does obsession look like from the inside?
- What happens in Hamlet's cabin on the ship to England?
- The minutes immediately after a murder in any text

Devise the missing scene. It must remain believable within the world of the text, and it should reveal a hidden tension, theme, or truth that the original text handles obliquely or avoids entirely.

Making challenge:
Present the missing scene alongside the moment in the original text that surrounds it, either performed or read aloud. The audience should experience the gap that the devised scene fills, and then discuss whether filling it changes the meaning of the original.

Reflection questions (for portfolios and written work):

- What does devising the missing scene reveal about why the original text left it out?
- What does the gap itself communicate? What work does the absence do?
- ITD's *A Farewell to Arms* removed the cameras entirely for the Switzerland section of the novel. Why might they have decided that this section of the story should resist being filmed?

Assessment objective: All boards: analysis of how theatrical choices convey meaning; understanding of how adaptation involves interpretation, not just translation.

Exercise 3: The Archive Exercise

ITD connection: In *War of the Worlds*, ITD constructs the protagonist's hallucinatory world from the fragments around him (objects, people, machinery) as if assembling a version of reality from incomplete evidence. The Archive Exercise draws on this idea: what if the original story is just one version, assembled from a partial and unreliable archive?



War of the Worlds (2026)

Aim: Students build a fragmented, multi-source "archive" of a classic text's events, discovering how the same story looks different depending on who records it and how.

Working in groups, imagine: "The original story is incomplete. You are researchers uncovering hidden evidence of what really happened."

Groups create a set of archive materials from the perspective of characters, witnesses, or institutions not represented in the original text. These might include:

- Diary entries or letters
- A CCTV transcript or security report
- Voice notes or fragments of recorded speech
- A police interview or official inquiry document
- Projected text: a "deleted" scene or suppressed document
- Testimony from an overlooked character
- A newspaper account written by someone with an agenda

The archive should contain contradictions: different sources should not entirely agree on what happened. The audience (or another group) pieces together "what really happened" and identifies the contradictions in the official narrative.

ITD production connection: In *The Zero Hour*, ITD used this structure to question the construction of historical narrative, the idea that history is assembled from partial, interested sources rather than recovered as a fixed truth. The Chinese camera crews operated as a "foreign archive", recording European events from outside the European frame.

Making challenge:
Groups present their archive as a short performance or installation, each archive item read, performed, or projected in turn. The overall effect should be of competing or fragmentary truth rather than a single coherent account.

Reflection questions (for portfolios and written work):

- What did constructing the archive reveal about whose perspective the original text was written from?
- How does having multiple, contradictory sources change the story?
- In ITD's work, what does it mean to suggest that a "classic" story might be incomplete or partial?

Assessment objective: OCR and Eduqas: social, historical, and cultural context; understanding of how narrative perspective shapes meaning.

Exercise 4: What Is the Text Avoiding?

ITD connection: ITD's adaptations frequently make explicit what their source texts kept implicit or suppressed: the colonialism in *Heart of Darkness*, the class politics of the domestic space in *A Farewell to Arms*, the misogyny embedded in the structure of *Macbeth*. This exercise trains students to read classic texts as ideological objects: things made by particular people at particular moments, which carry the assumptions of those moments whether they acknowledge them or not.
Aim: Students analyse what a classic text does not want to discuss, then create a short performance that makes that avoidance visible.

As a whole group or in pairs, take a classic text and ask: what does this text *not* want to talk about?

Possible answers:

- Colonialism in *The Tempest* or *Heart of Darkness*
- Class and labour in *Great Expectations* or any aristocratic drama
- Gendered violence in *Dracula, Macbeth*, or *Hamlet*
- Mental health and the treatment of women in *The Yellow Wallpaper, Jane Eyre*, or *Hamlet*
- Race in *Othello* or *A Raisin in the Sun* (what the text addresses, and what it still sidesteps)

Students create short performance responses (3–5 minutes) that expose the avoided issue. The performance should not simply illustrate the issue but stage the text's relationship to it, the act of avoidance, rather than the thing being avoided.

ITD production connection: *War of the Worlds* makes explicit the racism and xenophobia that H.G. Wells's novel carries without fully acknowledging. ITD's protagonist holds views that Wells's narrator would find horrifying, but that ITD argue are already implicit in the original text's anxieties about invasion and contamination.

Reflection questions (for portfolios and written work):

- What does identifying what a text avoids tell you about when and why it was written?
- Is it possible to adapt a classic text without also engaging with its ideological assumptions?
- What responsibility does ITD have, and what responsibility do you have as a theatre-maker, when adapting texts that contain views we now find unacceptable?



War of the Worlds (2026)

Assessment objective: All boards: "how meaning in performance texts can be informed by social, historical and cultural contexts"; Edexcel AO2 artistic intention; Eduqas and OCR evaluative components.

Exercise 5: Hidden Thought / Public Action

ITD connection: In multiple ITD productions, the screen shows the inner life of a character – a close-up of their face, a projected thought, a filmed reaction – while the live performance shows the public action. The gap between the two is where much of the meaning lives. This exercise replicates that layered structure.
Aim: Students stage a classic scene twice simultaneously, with the public version and the hidden emotional reality running in parallel.

Choose a scene from a classic text in which a character is performing for others: concealing what they feel, saying one thing while thinking another, or being observed in a moment of private crisis.

Stage it in two simultaneous layers:

- The public version: the scene as the other characters in the play experience it
- The hidden version: the character's internal reality, running at the same time

Ways to show the hidden layer:

- Projected inner monologue (text on a screen while the scene plays out below)
- A voice-over read live while the public scene is performed
- Split stage: the same moment shown in two versions simultaneously
- Filmed close-up of the character's face shown on screen while the body is in the public scene
- Performers freezing while a hidden thought is spoken directly to the audience

ITD production connection: In *Macbeth*, close-up projections of the performers' faces – operated by the witches – gave the audience access to interiority that the other characters on stage couldn't see. This is a direct example of the hidden thought/public action structure.



Macbeth (2023)

Making challenge:

Perform both layers simultaneously. Then discuss: at what moments did the two layers most powerfully contradict each other? What did that contradiction reveal?

Reflection questions (for portfolios and written work):

- What does the audience's privileged access to the hidden layer do to how they feel about the character?
- How does it change their relationship to the other characters in the scene, who don't have that access?
- When ITD uses camera close-ups to show inner states, what is the political implication of deciding whose inner life we get to see?

Assessment objective: OCR and Edexcel: artistic intention; how theatre makers use staging and design to communicate meaning; performance pathway AOs.

Exercise 6: "Who Benefits?"

ITD connection: ITD's adaptations often ask a simple but productive question about their source texts: who benefits from this story being told this way? In *War of the Worlds*, the answer is complicated: the protagonist is both a victim of his own ideology and a beneficiary of the structures that ideology protects. In *Heart of Darkness*, the answer is even more uncomfortable. This exercise trains students to read classic texts as instruments of power as well as stories.
Aim: Students analyse the power structure of a classic scene and create an adaptation that exposes rather than reproduces it.

Working in pairs or small groups, take a scene from a classic text and ask:

- Who has power in this scene?
- Who controls the narrative? Whose version of events is the one we're meant to believe?
- Who disappears from the scene, or is present but not counted?
- Whose version of events becomes "truth" by the end?

Then adapt the scene to expose the hidden power structure. The adaptation should not simply reverse who has power but make the structure itself visible: the way the scene produces and reproduces a particular distribution of power.

Examples:

- In *Macbeth*, ITD's approach invites us to ask: what if the kingdom is the victim, not Macbeth the tragic hero? What if Macbeth's backstory changes how we read his agency throughout the play?
- In *Heart of Darkness*: what does the novel look like if Kurtz's African subjects are the centre rather than the background?

- In *The Tempest:* what does the island's history look like from Caliban's perspective rather than Prospero's?

Reflection questions (for portfolios and written work):
- What did identifying the power structure reveal about the original text?
- Is it possible to adapt a scene without taking a position on its politics?
- How does ITD's decision to adapt particular texts connect to its political positions as a company?

Assessment objective: All boards: social, historical, and cultural context; artistic intention; critical analysis of practitioners' choices.

Exercise 7: Ghost Stories

ITD connection: ITD's adaptations of *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* – and of texts like *Heart of Darkness* that share the Gothic's fascination with the unsayable – are all stories haunted by what they cannot say directly. The Gothic genre itself is built on repression and return: the things that have been buried come back. This exercise uses that structure to generate new theatrical material.
Aim: Students invent the ghosts of a classic text (the suppressed voices, erased histories, and unacknowledged presences) and find ways to let them interrupt the main narrative.

Working with any Gothic or classic text, consider: every classic text is haunted by voices we never hear.

Students invent:
- A ghost: someone whose story the text erased or ended prematurely
- A memory: something a character carries but the text doesn't acknowledge
- An erased history: what existed before the story began, whose traces remain
- An imagined future: what happens after the text ends, to the characters who survive

These invented presences then interrupt the main narrative through:
- Projection – text or image appearing on stage during a live scene
- Sound – a voice, a fragment of music, an ambient sound from another time
- Direct address – a performer stepping out of the scene to speak as or about the ghost
- Filmed sequence – a pre-recorded "haunting" played during a live scene

This exercise works especially well with: *Hamlet, Frankenstein, Dracula, Jane Eyre, Wuthering Heights, 1984, The Tempest, Macbeth*.

ITD production connection: In *Heart of Darkness*, ITD used projection and sound to make present the voices and histories that Conrad's original novel systematically silences: the perspectives of the African people at the centre of the colonial encounter.



Heart of Darkness (2018)

Making challenge:
Groups stage a scene from their chosen text with at least one ghost interrupting it. The ghost should change the meaning of the scene, not just add atmosphere. After performing, groups discuss: what did the ghost reveal that the scene without it didn't?

Reflection questions (for portfolios and written work):

- What does it mean for a classic text to be "haunted"?
- Why might ITD choose to make ghosts present rather than simply discussing their absence?
- What is the difference between a ghost that adds atmosphere and a ghost that changes meaning?

Assessment objective: Edexcel and Eduqas: design pathway; theatrical style and conventions; artistic intention. Strong crossover with English Literature analysis.

Exercise 8: Contradict the Original

ITD connection: ITD's adaptations often propose an alternative reading of the source text, one that the text's structure seems to resist but that its details support. In its *Macbeth*, the production explores whether Macbeth is trapped rather than freely choosing his path. In its *Frankenstein*, the question is whether the Creature or Victor is the moral centre of the story. This exercise trains students to find the reading that the text seems to forbid, and then build a performance around it.

Aim: Students identify the dominant interpretation of a classic text or character, propose a contradictory reading, and create an adaptation pitch based on that hidden interpretation.

Pick a famous or key moment from a classic text. Ask: what if the accepted interpretation is wrong?

Examples:

- What if the Creature is the moral centre of *Frankenstein*, not Victor, and not the novel's explicit moral framework?
- What if Macbeth is trapped by fate, prophecy, and circumstance rather than freely choosing his actions?
- What if Dracula represents modernity, rationalism, and the future, and Van Helsing's group represents a reactionary defence of the past?
- What if the "monster" in any Gothic text is society, not the creature it produces?
- What if Ophelia understands exactly what is happening in Hamlet, and her "madness" is the only rational response to it?

Students develop an adaptation pitch (written or presented verbally) built around their contradictory reading. The pitch should include: the reading they're proposing, the specific evidence from the text that supports it, the theatrical choices they would make to foreground that reading, and what they would do with the text's resistance to that reading.

Reflection questions (for portfolios and written work):

- What evidence in the text supports your alternative reading?
- What does the text do to suppress or resist that reading, and how would you handle that in an adaptation?
- How does proposing a contradictory reading change your relationship to the source text?

Assessment objective: All boards: analysis of artistic intention; understanding of how adaptation involves critical interpretation; OCR and Eduqas extended writing components.

Exercise 9: The Unreliable Narrative

ITD connection: In ITD's work, certainty is rarely offered. *The Zero Hour* asks which version of the 1945 Berlin story is the "true" one. *War of the Worlds* asks how much of what we are watching is actually happening. Unreliability is a formal as well as a thematic choice: it places the audience in an active, critical relationship with the story rather than a passive, receptive one.

Aim: Students retell the same scene from three conflicting viewpoints, discovering how point of view shapes meaning and how unreliability can be used as a theatrical tool.

Choose a key scene from a classic text. Retell it three times, from three different perspectives. Each version changes:

- Who tells the story (first person narration, third person, collective)
- What details are included and what is left out
- The emotional tone and visual register (how is it filmed or staged?)
- What the version implies about who is to blame or who is right

The three versions should be genuinely contradictory: not just different in detail, but different in their fundamental account of what the scene means.

After presenting all three versions, the audience or group votes: which version feels most truthful? Then discuss: on what basis did they make that judgement?



The Zero Hour (2012)

ITD production connection: In *The Zero Hour*, the same Berlin events were presented through different framings – the "live" stage action, the edited footage, and the framing of the Chinese camera crews – each implying a different account of what was happening and why. The production never resolved the contradiction.

Reflection questions (for portfolios and written work):

- What made one version feel more "true" than the others? What does that reveal about how you read stories?
- Can any story be trusted? What does it mean to tell a story at all?
- How does ITD's use of multiple screens and simultaneous perspectives relate to this exercise?

Assessment objective: All boards: analysis of theatrical form and structure; how narrative choices shape audience experience; OCR and Edexcel evaluative writing.

Exercise 10: Hidden Contemporary Resonances

ITD connection: ITD's adaptations consistently find the contemporary political resonance buried inside a classic text and make it the explicit subject of their version. Finding that hidden resonance, and asking why it was hidden in the first place, is both a critical and a creative act.

Aim: Students identify a hidden contemporary issue inside a classic text and develop a short adaptation concept that brings it to the surface.

Ask: What hidden modern issue is buried inside this classic text?

Examples:

Text	Hidden Contemporary Resonance
Dracula	Media panic and contagion
Frankenstein	AI ethics
The Crucible	Online mob behaviour
Jekyll & Hyde	Digital identity
War of the Worlds	Migration/climate anxiety

Students develop a short adaptation concept (written pitch or verbal presentation) built around the contemporary resonance they've identified. The concept should explain:

- The contemporary issue and where it sits in the classic text
- The theatrical choices they would make to foreground it
- How their version is different from simply "updating the setting"

ITD production connection: This is one of the closest exercises to ITD's own dramaturgical process. Refer students to Screens, Bodies and Stories: Technology as Scenography in ITD's Work (Section 2) and to A Story of Devising, Adaptation and Collaboration (Section 1) for more on how ITD approaches the question of contemporary resonance.

Reflection questions (for portfolios and written work):

- Why was the contemporary resonance hidden in the original text? What historical or cultural conditions kept it implicit?
- What does making it explicit do to the audience's relationship to the classic text?
- What is the difference between a production that is "relevant" and one that is genuinely political?

Assessment objective: Edexcel: "how a practice developed in a different social, historical and cultural context can be understood and adapted to a contemporary age and audience"; OCR: "connections between the practitioners' work and 21st Century theatre making"; all boards contextual analysis.

Key Terms

Canon: The body of literature widely regarded as the most important or influential, and most often studied and performed. A canonical text is one of these works.
Devising: A process of creating a piece of theatre collaboratively in the rehearsal room, without a pre-written script as the starting point. Material is generated through improvisation, research, and experimentation. ITD's early work was more explicitly devised; their current process is script-led from the outset, though collaborative throughout.
Direct address: A performer speaking straight to the audience, stepping outside the scene rather than talking to the other characters.

Dramaturgy: The structural logic of how a piece of theatre is put together: the decisions about form, sequence, narrative, and meaning that shape the overall performance. A "dramaturgical rule" in ITD's practice is a decision about how the piece will work that all collaborators commit to and test against throughout the making process.

Scenography: The combined visual and spatial design of a production, encompassing set, lighting, costume, projection and sound, treated as a unified whole. In ITD's work, scenography is conceptually motivated from the earliest stages of making rather than being added to a finished piece of theatre. Each element carries meaning, not just atmosphere.

Source text: The original work (novel, film, play, or other material) from which an adaptation is made. In ITD's practice, the source text is a starting point and a set of constraints, not a blueprint to be faithfully reproduced.

Published 2026 as part of imitating the dog's learning resources (Section 4: Try It Yourself). For the companion document of technical and theatrical exercises, see Adaptation and imitating the dog: Practical Exercises (Section 4). For the theoretical context, see Screens, Bodies and Stories: Technology as Scenography in ITD's Work (Section 2).

For how these exercises link to GCSE, A Level and university specifications, see Curriculum Connections (Section 4).

Photography of *The Zero Hour, Heart of Darkness, Dracula: The Untold Story, Macbeth* and *War of the Worlds*: Ed Waring.