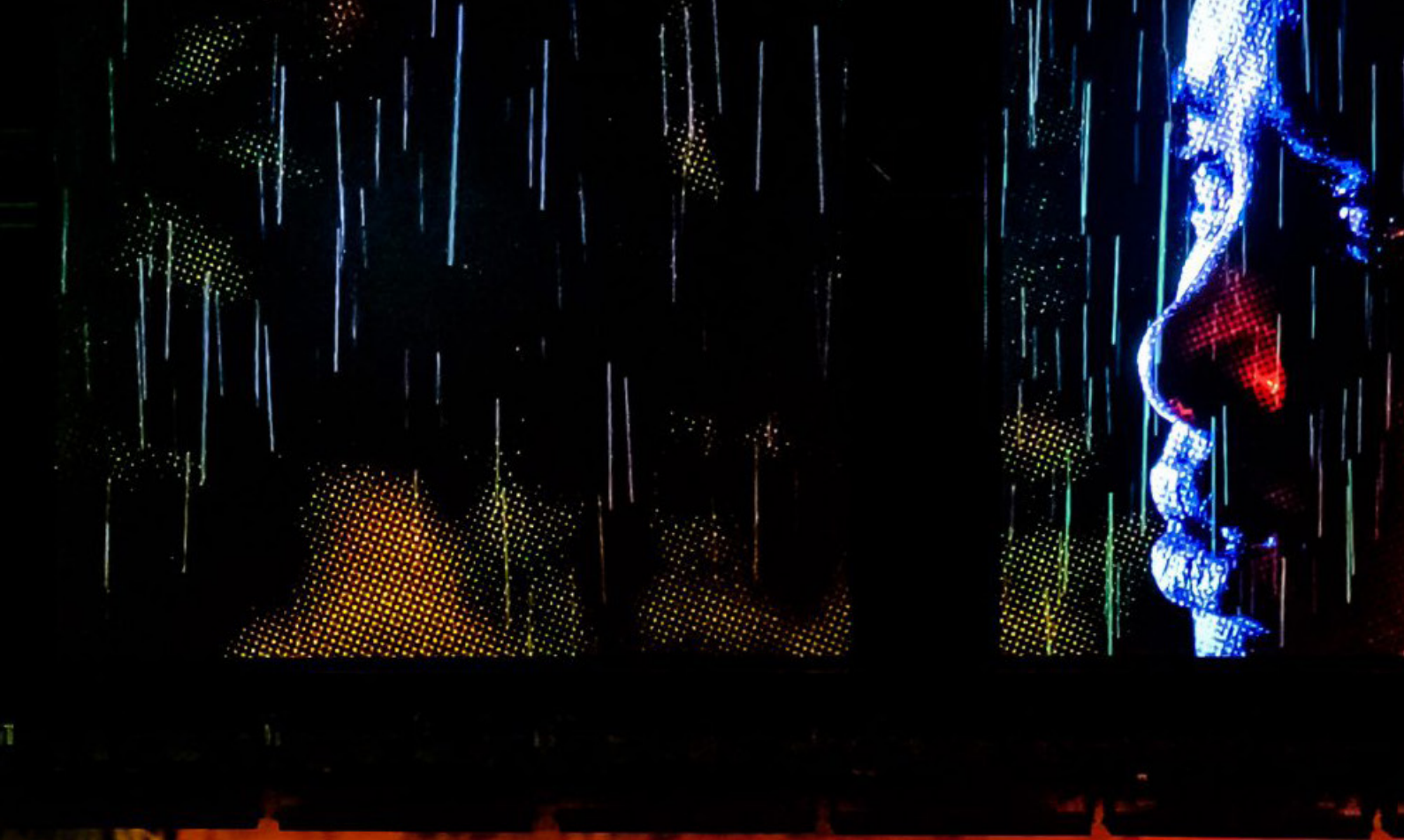


imitating the dog:
The Rules of the Game – How ITD Builds its Worlds

Andrew Quick, 2026

When making work in rehearsal, we often find ourselves talking about the rules that are in play in any given production. Performers who work with us frequently demand them, and they usually hold us to them too – even when we begin to feel that the rules we have set for ourselves are restrictive. So what do we mean by 'rules', and how do we use them in our rehearsal process?

Rules are often the limits we set ourselves in terms of the worlds we are creating. One example might be that we decide to present everything on stage from a single perspective. This is what we did in our recent production of *War of the Worlds* (2026), in which our protagonist, William Travers, wakes in hospital and attempts to escape the nightmare of an alien invasion by fleeing across the Channel to France. At the end of the performance, it is revealed that he died in the opening scene, and everything we have witnessed has been imagined in his dying moments. We often draw on the idea and form of a dream play – or of some other extreme psychological state – as the source of our narrative structure. That structure, in turn, sets limits for everything else: the performances actors develop, the characters they create, and all the other elements of the *mise-en-scène*: light, sound, design, costume.



War of the Worlds (2026)

We use the term *mise-en-scène* to mean everything within the scene, or within the cinematic frame, at any given moment: props, but also back-projection content, lighting, costume, and sound – all the scenic elements together. Everything we do in terms of staging stems from a starting concept that brings with it a set of rules governing all of these elements.

It is no accident that we have repeatedly been drawn to science fiction narratives and what might be called dream plays. *Kellerman* (2009) centres on the mental breakdown of its protagonist, Harry Kellerman, who meets a woman in a psychiatric hospital who persuades him that they can travel through time. This gave us enormous scope in terms of the places and times they visit, from the Elizabethan court of the sixteenth century to the battlefields of the Second World War. In narratives like this, we often need a character who centres the storytelling: someone who gives stability in an ever-changing and turbulent world. By 'centring' we mean that the story circulates around them. In *Kellerman*, that stability was provided by two versions of the psychiatrist treating Harry. One version, Dr Biddle, was a recognisably supportive figure with Harry's best interests at heart. The other, Bad Biddle, was a nightmare figure of violence and self-loathing that grew out of Harry's mania. This morphing character reflected Harry's changing psychological state and gave us a number of opportunities to generate moments of tension, horror, and dark humour.



Kellerman (2009)

Cinematic Rules

Rules are not limited to narrative structure. They often conform to what we might call the laws of genre and, because our work frequently draws on cinematic conventions, this means the rules of film language. Editing creates meaning by adhering to rules. It is a language with its own grammar. For example: if we see an exterior shot of a window, the convention is that the next shot takes us inside the room that window belongs to. If we are using cameras and live projection to create what is, in effect, a live film on stage, we will generally follow the rules of conventional cinema. This gives the audience a familiar framework through which to read what they are seeing.

A good example of this is the way we use shot/reverse shot on stage to provide continuity in dialogue sequences when we are making a live film in front of the audience, as we did in *War of the Worlds*. One of the challenges we often set ourselves is the near-impossible task of creating cinematic sequences in real time. When a reverse shot seems impossible – when there simply aren't enough performers on stage to create the sequence – the performer operating the camera will use a doll or a cut-out figure to create the over-the-shoulder shot an audience expects from cinema. This device allows the action to move quickly, without waiting for a living performer to get into place.

There is room, however, for dream sequences in which these rules are deliberately tested. *War of the Worlds contains a nightmare sequence in which we brought multiple strands together in a way that conventional cinema would not permit: the hospital narrative and the protagonist's cardiac arrest, the alien invasion, and documentary footage of far-right politics. The latter was an underlying theme running throughout the piece.* We collaged these strands together in a single sequence, allowing the logic of the dream to override the logic of cause and effect. Dreams permit a particular kind of freedom: they allow you to bring together things that could not otherwise occupy the same space.



War of the Worlds (2026)

Multiple Narratives and the Camera's World

Much of our work is built on multiple or dual narratives. In *The Zero Hour* (2012), we worked with multiple versions of the same historical moment: the last days of the Second World War in Berlin. We drew up a complex chart mapping all the narrative possibilities at any given moment across several parallel storylines.

Working with that multiplicity raised an immediate question about the rules governing the relationship between the performers and the camera operators. We had a live camera team and a film director who called 'cut' and 'action' on stage. The question was: do the performers, in their fictional world, know these people are there? We concluded that the camera crew would function like 'history' itself, an impersonal force documenting events as they unfold, never acknowledged by those under its scrutiny. This was both a pragmatic and a thematic decision. Thematically, it connected to the idea of history as a force that sweeps all before it, indifferent to the individuals caught up in it. Practically, it freed the performers from having to act out a relationship with the camera operators, which would have added another layer of storytelling to an already complex production. Sometimes the clearest path through a set of rules is to simplify.

A similar question arose in *Macbeth* (2023). Working with only five performers, we decided that the world of the Macbeths would be conjured entirely by the three witches, who in turn would play all the other characters in the play. The witches acknowledged their shape-shifting energies among themselves, but this was never recognised by the two Macbeths; they simply did not see those moments, even though they were performed in front of them. The Macbeths were trapped in the world the witches had conjured. Again, this rule was both pragmatic and liberating: it gave us a clear, efficient way to tell the story with a small company, and it gave the witches a consistent double role, as agents of fate within the fiction and as camera operators controlling the frame for the audience.



Macbeth (2023)

Video Design and the Camera as Scenographer

We often think of the camera operator – nearly always a performer – as a scenographer: framing the shot, deciding how close it needs to be, always aware of the stage picture they are creating within the wider *mise-en-scène*. The audience is often watching the screen and the larger stage space at once, or moving between the two in short intervals, so these decisions matter and are made collaboratively in technical rehearsal, though the final call sits with the directorial team. Simon Wainwright leads on video design, working closely with Pete Brooks and me.

Video design has a dramaturgical function beyond simply providing content; it works through colour, texture and rhythm. A shot might provide the specific narrative material a scene needs – for example, a wallpaper background – but the wider video landscape might also include snow, rain, or other material that carries meaning at the level of the whole story. The video material is not illustrative; it builds meaning through layers, textures, and repetition. An example of this is the two flat screens on wheels used within the stage space in *War of the Worlds*. They were used as model tables to provide specific narrative material, but they also had a broader dramaturgical function: at points in the production they became hospital heart monitors, reminding the audience that, in one sense, we had never left the hospital revealed in the performance's prologue.

One of the questions we return to often, both in rehearsal and in storyboarding, is how much we alter the video material. Do we leave it cinematically 'raw'? The more raw it is, the more realistic it appears, and the closer it sits to what audiences expect from cinema. We are also drawn to the graphic novel as a form, and often treat the video to enhance its graphicalisation, making it look drawn, as in a graphic novel. A good example of this can be seen in *Heart of Darkness* (2018), where all the live-filmed sections are heavily treated to enhance certain colours – greens, reds, yellows, and blues – really pushing the contrast. We shot all scenes against a green screen, wanting to emphasise the constructed nature of the world we were creating.



Heart of Darkness (2018)

The Rules of Sound and Light

As set out above, our use of sound and light generally follows two rules. The first is to serve the storytelling. The second is to remind the audience that what they are watching is being constructed in front of them. An example of the second can be seen in *Heart of Darkness*, where a certain naturalism in the stage lighting sits alongside background light that is bright and harsh. This creates a stark contrast between a lighting state that reflects a potential realism on stage and the heavily treated image on the screen. There are numerous examples of this tension in our productions of *Macbeth*, *Dracula*, and *War of the Worlds*. We are always seeking to create a tension between the stage and screen worlds, a tension that has real significance because it interrogates how spectacle, narrative and meaning are being constructed, and the hidden ideologies that support them.



Dracula: The Untold Story (2021)

There is also a practical dimension to lighting. Because we use projected light on stage, we have to be careful not to over-light the space or allow light to spill onto the screens, as this weakens the projected image. Our lighting designer works constantly between the logic of meaning and dramaturgy on one hand, and the practical demands of our projection-based technology on the other.

Our use of sound follows a similar path. One rule is to support the logic of realism and genre. In this sense, we use a great deal of foley (everyday sound effects matched to the action) to build a world the audience finds believable. In *War of the Worlds* we use this kind of sound throughout, including car doors opening and closing, gunshots and a doorbell ringing. This level of acoustic detail matters a great deal to us, and is put together with real care. But we also use sound more abstractly, not simply to build atmosphere in a non-diegetic way (non-diegetic sound is heard only by the audience, like underscore; diegetic sound exists inside the world of the story, where the characters could hear it), but to carry a thematic meaning that hints at something beyond the immediate scene. In *Frankenstein* (2024), for example, we used a pared-down version of Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder* ('Songs on the Death of Children') for the movement sections. James Hamilton, our composer, contrasted two sound worlds beautifully. One was drawn from the Mahler song cycle, while the other supported the storytelling across the two narrative strands that made up the bulk of the piece. These were the creation of the creature, drawn from the original novel, and the story of a couple confronting the news that one of them is pregnant.

» For how these systems physically work – desks, servers, speakers and the signal chain that joins them – see the technical plans in Section 3: Lighting Design – Technical Plan, Music and Sound Design – Technical Plan and Video Design and Projection Mapping – Technical Plan.



Frankenstein (2024)

Breaking the Rules

Rules, of course, are there to be broken. There are moments when we choose to override the rules we have set for ourselves, and those moments are always part of the dramaturgy, becoming structural events for the audience, whether or not they can articulate why. But you have to be careful. The complex theatrical world you have built rests on the audience's trust that what happens in front of them will be consistent and discoverable. If you break a rule carelessly, that trust can collapse, and once an audience is lost, it is very difficult to bring them back. Breaking a rule only works when the audience has understood the rules well enough to feel the significance of its violation.



Heart of Darkness (2018)

Practical Exercises

The following exercises explore rules as a concept, examining how to set them, use them and break them with purpose. They are designed to be used after reading the essay above and after students have seen or watched recordings of at least one ITD production. They work alongside, rather than instead of, the broader devising exercises in the Adaptation and imitating the dog: Practical Exercises and Excavating Hidden Stories in Classic Texts documents.

Exercise 1: Setting and Breaking a Rule

ITD connection: As described above, ITD frequently sets itself a single governing rule for a production, whether a single perspective, a consistent relationship between camera and performer, or a fixed logic for when sound moves from diegetic to non-diegetic (see Key Terms, below). The rule is only meaningful once an audience has understood it; breaking it then becomes a deliberate dramatic event, as described in 'Breaking the Rules' above.

Aim: To experience, as a deviser, the difference between a rule that shapes a scene and a rule that is simply broken without preparation.

In small groups, devise a short scene (2–3 minutes). Before you start devising, agree and write down one explicit rule that will govern the scene. This could be about narrative (for example, everything is shown from one character's point of view), about the performers' relationship to an implied camera or audience, or about design (for example, a single colour or sound governs the whole scene).

- Devise and rehearse the scene so that the rule is clearly established and legible to an audience.
- Identify one moment where the rule will be broken.
- Perform the scene, including the moment of rule-breaking, to another group.
- Discuss: did the audience notice the rule before it was broken? What did the break communicate, and did it feel earned?

Reflection questions (for portfolios and written work):

- What was your rule, and why did you choose it?
- How did you make the rule legible to an audience before you broke it?
- What did breaking the rule add to the scene? Would the moment have worked without the rule being established first?
- Which ITD production most resembles the kind of rule-breaking you attempted, and why?

Already tried 'Breaking the System' (Exercise 4) in the Three Worlds framework document? That exercise asks something similar, but through ritual and system specifically — this one opens the rule up to narrative, camera, sound or design. Worth doing again with a different rule type.

Exercise 2: Reverse-Engineering the Rules

ITD connection: This exercise develops analytical skill directly relevant to written assessment: identifying a practitioner's governing rules from the finished work, rather than being told them in advance.

Aim: To practise identifying rules through close analysis of ITD's production choices.

Choose one of the following productions, which you can find under Watch at Home on the Our Work page of our website: *6 Degrees Below the Horizon* (2012), *The Zero Hour* (2012), *Heart of Darkness* (2018), *Dr Blood's Old Travelling Show* (2020) or *Dracula: The Untold Story* (2021). Watch the whole production. Then choose a single scene or sequence of around five minutes, watch it at least twice more, and attempt to identify the rules operating in that sequence across each of the following areas:

- Narrative – whose perspective is the sequence shown from? Is time linear?
- Camera and video – who controls the camera? Is the footage raw or graphicalised? What is the relationship between the live body and the screen?
- Sound – is the sound diegetic, non-diegetic, or both? Does it shift, and if so, when?
- Design – what rules govern colour, lighting, or costume in this sequence?

Reflection questions (for portfolios and written work):

- Which rules were consistent throughout the sequence, and which were broken?
- Where a rule was broken, what effect did it have on your understanding of the story or character?
- Reference the relevant Assessment Objective for your specification: how does identifying a practitioner's rules support your analysis of their artistic intention?

Key Terms

Mise-en-scène: The French term for everything visible within a single shot or scene at any given moment — props, lighting, costume, set and the positioning of performers — considered as a combined whole. ITD uses it to mean all the scenic elements working together, whether on stage or within the cinematic frame.

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.

Shot/reverse shot: A film editing convention in which the camera cuts back and forth between two subjects, typically two people in conversation — first showing one, then the other. ITD replicate this on stage using cameras and, where a performer isn't available for the reverse angle, a doll or cut-out figure.

Foley: Everyday sound effects (footsteps, doors, objects being handled) created to match the action.

Diegetic / non-diegetic: Diegetic sound exists inside the world of the story, where the characters could hear it — a door slamming, dialogue, a phone ringing. Non-diegetic sound is heard only by the audience, such as a musical underscore. ITD moves deliberately between the two: using diegetic sound to build a believable world, and non-diegetic sound to carry meaning beyond the immediate scene.

Graphicalisation: Treating filmed or projected footage so that it looks drawn or illustrated rather than photographically "raw" — closer to the page of a graphic novel than a documentary image. ITD uses graphicalisation to signal that a sequence belongs to a different register from straightforward live-camera realism.

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