

The Best Thing



THE BEST THING
EDUCATION PACK

SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

The Best Thing Education Pack is here to give teachers and students a comprehensive resource to accompany a visit to a performance. It aims to promote an understanding of the production, how it has been made, and how the processes of making theatre can feed into students' own exam work. There are interviews, Q and As, links, information and activities that will help you gain knowledge and understanding of how plays are constructed and realised, and the ways that the professionals involved contribute to the production and its meaning.

Welcome to Vamos Theatre

Vamos Theatre is the UK's leading professional full mask theatre company. We devise and tour accessible, humorous and fearless work which showcases the best in full mask performance. A Vamos production is known for its visual inventiveness, original music, wit and innovation, and we explore themes in a way that creates a strong emotional resonance for our audiences. Vamos is dedicated to making work based on stories of real people, and our productions are rooted in true life experiences and events. The company was established in 2006, and is based in Worcester.

For more about us and the Vamos team visit www.vamostheatre.co.uk

What is full mask theatre?

The answer is in the title! It's theatre in which the actor wears a mask that covers the entire face. When wearing a full mask you cannot speak, so all acting is done non-verbally....think of black and white silent movies. On a more complicated level, full mask theatre works best when the non-verbal communication is precise, detailed and economic. Full mask theatre cuts through to exactly what needs to be told, without words.

SECTION 2: ABOUT THE BEST THING

Story synopsis:

The Best Thing, a co-commission with London International Mime Festival, is set in 1966, 1967, and in 2010. There is a brief scene in the Queen's Silver Jubilee year, 1977.

Susan, who is 17, lives with her father, Bill. We first meet Susan in a scene where she is listening to music on her record player (prologue). The story then moves forward to 2010, when we see Susan's father, now an old man, and a younger woman called Lisa, at a funeral we realise is Susan's (scene 1).

Back in 1966, Susan gets ready to go out: we see the loving relationship she has with her father, and how he cares for her: but also that Susan is a teenager, playing her music loudly and wearing skirts her father thinks too short. Bill is old fashioned and has strict morals (scene 2). We meet Susan's boyfriend Dennis, who likes to try to look rebellious, although at heart he is a nice lad (scene 3).

Moving forward to 2010, Lisa and Bill arrange to meet after the funeral. Whilst this begins awkwardly, they soon share photos and begin comparing their physical features, and it becomes clear that Lisa is related to Bill in some way (scene 4).

It's now the day of the World Cup final, held at Wembley on July 30th 1966. Susan goes to get her hair cut, and a fantasy scene follows where she is beautified by her friends ready for her date with Dennis (scene 5). She and Dennis run home and settle down to watch the football. Eventually they realise neither of them is interested in the match, rather in each other, and they run upstairs. A comedy sex scene follows, accompanied by the World Cup commentary (scene 6).

We now move back to Lisa and Bill, where Lisa reflects on the previous scene telling Bill that was how she came about, as she is Susan's baby, and Bill's grandchild. Bill knows this already, but the audience may only now realise this is who she is. Lisa is angry with Bill and shows him photos of her as a child in an orphanage, and with adopted parents (scene 7). The next scene shows a young Lisa with her adopted mother, and the unloving life she had (scene 8).

Back in 1966, Susan is at her typing class: during the scene the students learn to type to music. At the end of the scene, she is sick and we realise she is pregnant (scene 9).

Act 2 opens with Bill at home in 1966: he is ironing, listening to his favourite opera, and putting away Susan's clothes. In a drawer he finds her diary, and at first decides not to read it, but then can't help himself. In the diary he finds out that Susan is pregnant, and is furious. Bill then has a moral dilemma: he is very angry, as Susan is not married and this was seen as very shameful at the time: but he also loves Susan dearly. In the end, his anger wins out and when Susan and Dennis come home he throws Dennis out and confronts Susan (scene 10).

We then move forward to Susan giving birth, in a comic scene set in a maternity ward (scene 11). As the baby is born, times begin to merge and Lisa and Bill watch the scene as if they were there. We see Lisa's version of what happened, in which Susan rejects her baby, as this is the story Lisa has been told (scene 12). Bill decides he must tell Lisa the truth and 'rewinds' the scene, which happens again but this time showing the truth: that young Bill made Susan give her baby away. On hearing this, Lisa storms out in anger (scene 13).

We then see Susan and young Bill back at home: Susan is depressed and refuses to eat. Bill tries to look after her, and already realises that what he did was a mistake as he is losing his daughter. Whilst Bill is in the back yard, Susan packs her bags and leaves home (scene 14).

Several stories then happen simultaneously, in a 'split screen' technique. Susan is shown alone, spiralling into depression and missing her baby: we see Dennis waiting for Susan, returning again and again as time passes before finally giving up. And we see young Bill, barely coping with the loss of his daughter, and deeply regretting his actions (scene 15). In a sudden shift, young Bill becomes old Bill, and we find ourselves in 2010, where Bill is waiting for Lisa to arrive. He has already lost a daughter, and he is determined not to lose Lisa too. He sets out everything that Susan saved for her baby – letters, photos and objects – and gives them to Lisa. He shows her photos of her relatives, until they surround her on all sides. At last, Bill says he is sorry and in a final act, they make a physical connection for the first time (scene 16).

Where the story came from

Like all of Vamos Theatre shows, *The Best Thing* is rooted in real life stories. We interviewed people who were teenagers in the 1960s about what life was like, and in particular we talked to women who had experienced having their baby taken away, or who were adopted because their mothers were not married. Writer Rachael Savage also read and researched numerous books, newspaper articles and films around adoption and the 1960s.

About the structure

The Best Thing deliberately uses a non-linear structure, telling the story in flash-backs and flash-forwards, so that the story is revealed only gradually. By moving between eras, the audience has to work harder to understand the sequence of events, but the performance contains more surprises and twists. In Act 2, eras seem to merge as characters from one world observe and make changes to the story.

The show's setting: life for teenagers in the 1960s

The Best Thing is based on research into life as a teenager in the 1960s, which is acknowledged as a decade of great social change in the UK. Susan, the main character, is formed from the memories of women we talked to who grew up then: here are some of the things they said:

“If I went out in too short a skirt, my dad was appalled – he’d say, ‘go and cover yourself up’. Men came home from the war and were protective of their girls.”

“We loved twisting - ‘let’s twist again like we did last summer’... But the Beatles revolutionised people’s lives: we got empowerment through music, and young people took more risks.”

The 1960s saw a change in attitudes to sex, marriage and children, but this was surrounded by conflicting moral beliefs, creating a split between the establishment and those who wanted more freedom. The 1960s saw key changes in law, such as the legalisation of the contraceptive pill. There are some excellent books about the 1960s, teenagers, and the sexual revolution (see the Resources section at the end of this Pack), and you can find out a lot by watching films based or made in the 1960s, such as *A Taste of Honey* (1961), *Billy Liar* (1963), the TV drama *Cathy Come Home* (1966), or *Scandal* (1989).

SECTION 3: THE MAKING OF THE BEST THING

Many people are involved in making a Vamos show, and each contribute a different element. We’ve asked some of our production team to tell us about what their jobs involve, the kind of skills needed, their personal approach, and ways into the profession for young people.

Directing mask and devised theatre: Rachael Savage

What is the job of a director?

The job of the director in my opinion is to think of the most imaginative, playful, theatrical ways of telling a story: but in doing that, to take the actors on the same journey. At the start of each day, I make sure that we warm up physically and mentally (and in doing so make sure we are all happy and energised...which often means laughing a lot) and then I have a detailed plan of which scenes we will work on in the day. The more prepared I am with ideas before rehearsals, the more focused and productive the days are. Sometimes I set up improvisations, sometimes I cement detailed action on stage, and I always give notes (bossy instructions) on what comes out of rehearsals.

How does directing full mask differ from word based theatre?

Full mask theatre is sometimes more frustrating than word based theatre; it's not always easy to say something without words! Though in some ways it is similar to word based theatre, in that we start without masks, encouraging the actors to talk and speak what they are thinking, but making sure that their bodies are saying the same thing. Then we put masks on and realise what works and what doesn't. Sometimes when wearing a mask, the meaning of a physical gesture totally changes: once when performing in mask I tried to tell somebody that I was going for a cigarette - they misinterpreted my action as a rude hand gesture!

How do you decide what masks to use?

It's more about deciding which actors to use for which masks, but I'll come on to that. When writing the storyline, I write a detailed character description and send it to Russell Dean our mask maker. Russell then makes small models out of clay called maquettes, which he photographs and sends to me to make sure we are both agree. Usually I'm delighted and fall in love with his interpretation. Occasionally I might say, 'Russell, she's really harsh, can we lighten her up at all?' Then when the masks arrive I work with my cast to decide which actor suits which mask. In *The Best Thing*, the mask for the hairdresser was so strong, that she soon got recast as the nurse. They swop and change, as well as make appearances in more than one show.

What does 'devised' theatre mean?

Devised theatre means making it up, rather than starting with a script with words. All of our work is devised, based on true stories that have been carefully researched. Devising with Vamos happens in layers. I research and write the structure. I work closely with Janie, our Associate Artist Composer, and she tackles me on structure as well as ideas. We then take the basic script into rehearsals to start devising through improvising, playing, mucking around. We try to accept all ideas, get loads, and then chuck the rubbish ones out. That's how I devise theatre!

How can someone become a director?

I went to Drama School and did a BA Degree where I specialised in directing. I then worked as an actor for ten years to learn from other directors how to direct. I'm what actors call an 'actor's director' as I understand how it feels to perform. I've worked with some directors that are so intellectual that I had to keep stopping them to ask what on earth they were talking about. So, how can someone become a director? By gaining experience in theatre from school, drama school, university, and then directing as much as possible. An additional important skill is to be able to look after people - actors can be fragile beasts.

Designing the set and costumes: Carl Davies***What's the journey from first having ideas to the set standing on the stage?***

Firstly, I always read the script to get a good overview. After absorbing the show as a whole I'll then do a scene by scene breakdown of dates, times, weather and time of year along with any scene changes that are needed. It's then my job to create a series of mood boards of images, samples and drawings so the director and I can see visually how the set might evolve. Then I take all the information away and developed that into a white card scale model of the set in its basic form. Once this is agreed, I'll make a full scale model with texture, colour, props, lighting and furniture. I then create technical drawings of the set for the builder to build from. When the set is built, I paint and decorate it, order all of the furniture and furnishings, and sort out props. After a week or two and some changes, the show is ready for the public and I get to sit back and enjoy the show. Or pick holes in the things I can still see need doing!!

What were your inspirations for the set design?

I started by looking at relevant images online and in books, from the 1960s in particular. I also take photographs of things, people, objects and lights, and used those too. I wanted a set that could evolve and be transformed by the way the actors used it, and to reflect the separation and division that the characters are experiencing in the story, with lots of divided spaces.

How do you decide what a character will wear?

Oh gosh this is the hardest thing. Sometimes a show is set in a period and you get to absorb all of that era, and the different types of people and what they would have worn. But the hardest thing is having a vision and having to stick to a period! Don't forget, a lot of people wear clothes for ten or twenty years, so eras can often be blurred and if you're not careful it can also be stereotyped. The characters always have a back story and this I find often more interesting than the scene they are in. You may see a character come from work and I'm interested in the job they have just done before entering the stage, what marks they might have on their costume, what uniform they might wear, how warm their shoes might be.

What kind of skills do you need to become a set and costume designer?

You need imagination, or the drive to find out what it is that's asked of you, and to be creative. It helps to be able to draw, though a lot of designers can't draw, but still have the ideas. A lot of the time designers will do lots of the making and construction. I'd say having lots of skills helps you get regular work. Try to learn all the time - the more you can do, the more you are open to job opportunities.

Designing the lights: Chris Barham***What does the job of lighting designer involve?***

The Lighting Designer creates lighting 'states' for the show. This means that you are effectively lighting the show using a palette of different colours, lighting angles and varying levels of intensity and focus, in order to pick out areas of stage, set and most importantly, to light the actors. The process involves working with the director to decide on the show's creative vision, and attending run-throughs of the show to decide where lights need to be focused. You then create a lighting plan to show the lighting crew what types of lights to be used, where to rig them, and in what colour. Then the Lighting Designer focuses the lights with the lighting crew, and creates the lighting states that can be programmed into a lighting desk.

How did you become a lighting designer?

I trained in Technical Theatre at RADA (Royal Academy of Dramatic Art). The course introduced me to the art of lighting design, and the equipment/technical processes involved. Many drama schools and universities offer lighting design and technical theatre degrees, and I currently work at a university, teaching the next generation of technical theatre specialists/lighting designers.

Can lighting help tell the story? Is it possible to use lighting to tell the audience about how a character is feeling or to anticipate mood?

Yes, lighting can certainly help tell a story. Colour and lighting angles can help to tell the audience how a character is feeling – for example, if a character was feeling sad, a primary blue backlight coupled with some cold pastel colours, could help to promote this feeling. Lighting also works really well when coupled with sound effects, music and soundscapes – a sad song played at the same time as a slow lighting change to cold lighting will help support a character's sad feelings for example. In terms of mood, lighting can be used in a transition, a scene change for example, to slowly set the mood of the next scene. The speed of lighting crossfades makes a huge difference. The lights snapping out instantly to a black-out could heighten the fear after hearing a loud scream, but fading out slowly after a final line can leave a poignant ending image for the show.

What's different about lighting full mask theatre?

Full mask theatre requires me to make sure that actors are lit from a more flat, straight-on lighting angle, and also from below, as the exaggerated facial features of the masks mean that shadows under the eyes and nose can be a problem if lit too heavily from above.

Using music and sound: Janie Armour***How do you approach making a soundtrack for a Vamos show?***

The process starts many months before rehearsals begin with discussions about the style of the production, the characters, and how we are going to tell the story, as it's important for all the production team to be in agreement. Because full mask theatre has no speech, there is a great reliance on sound – the sheer amount of musical material is much more than usual; so the challenge is doing a really good job in the time available. In *The Best Thing*, I wanted to help guide the audience through the many time shifts that the production takes, so I chose to use a mixture of newly composed music and original 1960s music, with a real difference in mood and pace between them. With all Vamos's shows, once I have the basic ideas, I'm in the privileged position to be able to devise the soundtrack in rehearsals with the team, which helps make the soundtrack blend and support the action to its best.

Do you use live musicians or digital or sampled sound?

I use everything I can. I love the sound of live musicians, so where possible I play the instruments, or get musicians in; and I love real sound (I taken a sound recorder around with me most of the time), so I often incorporate these (rain, cars, scissors, typewriters) into the soundtrack, as well as creating digital noise or glitches. If it's out there use it!

Does a theatre composer need to be technical?

Well I think it really helps. There are many composers, particularly in the classical field, who aren't, and who are brilliant composers: and if you are using live musicians you don't really need a technical head beyond amplification. But if you learn some sequencing software, how to record instruments, and about how sound behaves in space, more possibilities will be open to you.

How did you become a theatre composer?

I trained originally as a stage manager at Guildhall School in London, which gave me a fantastic grounding in theatre craft and how theatre works. But I'd always played in bands and I slipped sideways into playing piano for a production and that was that. I went on to do a degree in music and a Masters in composition at Goldsmiths College, which gave me a really good musical foundation. There are many paths to being a theatre musician or composer, trained or untrained: the important things are understanding the particular role music has in theatre, being able to actualise your ideas, and not being precious – theatre is a team game and you have to compromise all the time, in a good way.

Why are music and sound important in a Vamos show?

If you ever see a mask scene without music or sound, you'll know. The absence of spoken word in full mask creates a void. As an audience you listen out for something and hear the actors breathing, and chairs scrapping and footsteps: that can be interesting sometimes, but it can also detract from the emotion or story. Music and sound create support for the action, and contain their own narrative, which helps guide the audience: the trick is to use music that has a purpose, but without distracting or dominating.

Being a mask actor: Marissa Gunter

What is the most challenging thing about acting in full mask?

Acting in full mask really limits your ability to see; this, inevitably, creates a few problems. Your own body becomes a bit of a stranger and what you think you're doing with your body can turn out to be very different; we film ourselves during rehearsals and it's always a bit of a shock watching the footage back until you get used to it.

How much can you decide what your character is like, and how much is decided by the mask itself?

Each mask has its own fixed expression so, inevitably, certain decisions about action, gesture and movement will be dictated by the mask; what works with one will not work with another. This isn't to say that an actor has no input to creating the character, there's plenty of scope to play. It is up to the actor to make the offers, to experiment with the character and to find their own internal monologue and 'voice'.

How can you express what a character is feeling when the mask never changes?

Positioning of the mask plays a big part in expressing emotion with the, very general, rule that if a character is sad, the mask needs to tip downwards slightly and when a character is happy the mask needs to tip upwards. We do not just show emotion in our face though do we? I would be able to tell if someone was feeling a bit nervous or was in a bad mood if they entered the room with a brown paper bag over their head. We show emotion through the quality of our action and gesture, our pace, through where we hold tension, through our rhythm and breath.

What particular skills does mask acting require?

'Pull it back! Do less!' As with any acting, mask acting requires believability and authenticity. It is tempting when you put a mask on for the first time to either over compensate in your action, thinking that you need to give more because your face is covered, or make your movements big and stylised because the expression of the mask is. Mask theatre is an illusion; we are trying to trick the audience into believing that the characters are real people, so you need to be more economical in your movement and more subtle, more believable.

Is it hard to become a professional actor? What advice would you give to someone who wants to be an actor?

To be a professional actor you need to be tough, you need to persevere and you need to truly love it. You need to start making contacts now; research local theatre groups, contact your local theatres for any opportunities and work experience. If you start working on your craft now and experiencing a variety of different styles, developing a variety of skill sets, you can begin to see what your specific 'thing' is. And keep going!

What's life like on the road with Vamos?

I have been lucky enough to be put with a team of people that I get on with, which makes the whole experience a lot more enjoyable. Inevitably there are ups and downs; with five people touring together for six months you need to be sensitive, look after one another and be on hand with a hug, a cup of tea or LX tape! Touring is certainly not a holiday, you need to be prepared to work hard and as any professional will tell you, you only get out what you put in.

SECTION 4: ACTIVITIES

In this section, we'd like to share three simple drama exercises with you that we use in developing our shows, including *The Best Thing*. The aims of these exercises are:

- To establish physical character using pace, pause, gesture and isolation
- To establish the importance of clarity in non-verbal communication
- To look at the use of music in mask theatre

These exercises are designed specifically for mask theatre, but the skills of establishing character, clarity of movement and creating atmosphere are equally applicable to unmasked theatre.

If you are a teacher and interested in trying out mask theatre with your students, we produce a Full Mask Set which is perfect for use in your own full mask productions or follow up sessions after seeing a Vamos performance. The price of the set is £375 (+p&p), which includes a free Resource Pack, full of further exercises, games and tips.

See more at: www.vamostheatre.co.uk/merchandise

Exercise 1 Catwalk

You will need:

- Eight Vamos masks (or more if you have them): the exercise also works unmasked if you don't yet have a mask set
- Upbeat, fast 'catwalk' music, ideally without words
- A camera device

Stage 1: Striking a pose

All actors split into two different groups and start at opposite corners of the back of the stage. You should have as many masks as possible taking part i.e. all eight masks. One at a time, each actor walks to centre stage in the way they think that their character would walk on a catwalk. They then pull three poses, with pauses in between, so that the full mask has time to be read by the audience. Their last pose could be encouraged to be ridiculous or out of character. They then walk to the opposite side of where they started, and the first person waiting on that side takes their turn.

Stage 2: the Full Collection photo

When all the actors have had their turn, ask all the catwalk characters to come back on stage to do their final pose. Ask them to be on their best behaviour, and take a photo. Now ask them to show their true colours, their 'other side', reacting to other people around them, and take a second photo.

This is an exercise in which the whole group gets the chance to have a go.

Exercise 2 Two people meet



You will need:

- Two chairs
- Two Vamos masks, if you have them
- Music of your choice, ideally without words

When the music starts, two people come on stage entering one at a time (tell them who goes first). The first character should sit down on one of the chairs, which cues the second character to enter the stage and sit on the other chair.

When each mask enters the stage, ask them to come on in character, look around at the whole audience so that everyone gets to see the mask, look at the chair, look at the audience and then go and sit down. We describe this as ‘audience, chair, audience, go.’

When both characters are sitting down, they should then clock (look at) each other five times, and then leave the stage, one at a time. When each mask exits, they need to first look at the audience, look at the exit, look at the audience and then leave. We describe this as ‘audience, exit, audience, go.’

1. Beginning: “Audience, chair, audience, go.”
2. Middle: Clock each other five times.
3. End: “Audience, exit, audience, go.”



Discuss:

- What worked, and what the story was
- The internal monologue (what the characters were ‘saying’ in their heads: see the last section of the Pack for a more detail)
- The importance of the scene having a beginning, a middle and an end, which gives the scene structure



Development:

Bill and Lisa meet to look through photographs (a scene from *The Best Thing*)

Follow the exercise again, but instead of the characters clocking each other five times, put a small photo album in a bag and have one person give the other person it as a present. Watch how they react whilst looking through the photos.

Exercise 3 Using a mask script

You will need:

- Three masks: An innocent teenage daughter mask, a strict Dad mask, a teenage lad mask
- A small selection of props
- A selection of music, from popular current music to classical with everything in between!

This exercise breaks down into three stages. Each stage focuses on making sure that the actor has complete clarity in their movements, and their internal monologue can be read by the audience.

Stage 1:

Split the group into pairs. If there is an odd number, one lucky group can have a director. In pairs, read the script included here from *The Best Thing*. Ask the actors to walk the script through and be aware of how they are 'saying' the lines with their body. Each actor should have an awareness of the pace of the character's walk and movements and what gestures they are using to reflect the internal monologue.

Stage 2:

Once they have learnt the script, the actors perform the scene without using words. Both actors need to be constantly checking that they are clearly conveying their internal monologue through their bodies. It is also important to ensure that only one person has the focus at a time so the audience are able to understand where to look (for more on this, see the final section of the Pack).

Stage 3:

Mask work is impossible without a director or outside eye. Ask another group member or the audience to be the outside eye and feedback on what they see. Discussion points for the director/audience could include:

Discuss:

- Did we understand what was going on?
- Did we understand what the characters were saying, thinking or feeling?
- Did we know who to be watching at any one time?
- How could we physically say something more clearly?

Development:

Find a piece of music that either supports or distracts from the action and play it as you run the scene again.

Here are some suggestions of different music to try:

- A well-known song with lyrics
- A piece of instrumental music
- A piece of music from a well-known film
- A particularly fast or slow piece of music

Discuss:

- What did each piece of music do to the scene?
- What happened when you played a song with lyrics?
- What happened to the pace of the scene?
- How did it feel to perform with the music?

Scripts: *The Best Thing* Mask Scenes**Option 1 - Flashback to 1966, Strict Parenting**

Bill is sitting at the kitchen table counting out his pennies, dividing up money for the month's bills and worrying about not having enough. Susan is on her way out to meet her boyfriend and is wearing a skirt that is tucked up above the knee. Bill is an overly protective single Dad; Susan is a 17 year old teenager in love.

[Susan sneaks behind Bill to grab a biscuit out of the biscuit tin, takes the biscuit and leaves the tin on the table with the lid off]

Susan: *"Right, now for a swift exit..."*

Bill: *"Ey-ey-ey you've had your biscuit for today!" Picks up tin. "Put it back."*

Susan: *"But Dad!"*

Bill: *"Put it back!"*

[Susan puts the biscuit back and walks towards the door]

Bill: [beckons with pipe] *"Ey missy, come back."* [Indicates with pipe] *"Your skirt - wind it down below the knees."*

Susan: [sighs, unrolls it] *"Ok?"*

Bill: *"Better."* [Bill goes back to counting out his money]

[Susan pauses and looks at Bill and the money that he has out on his kitchen table]

Susan: [sidles over, cute] *"Daddy, Daddy, I do love you Daddy."* [Cuddling him]

Bill: *"What do you want? Oh I know, here you go, have a penny."*

Susan: *"Thanks, dad!"* [Trips off without looking at the money. Opens hand and looks] *"Oh... um.... dad? It's not quite enough."*

Bill: *"We have to pay the bills!"*

Susan: *"But, I need a haircut..."*

Bill: *"But you look gorgeous!"*

Susan: *"No I don't, my hair's horrible."*

[As they both clock the audience, we see Susan's pain at being uncomfortable in her teenage body with a babyish haircut, and Bill's pain at having to bring up a teenage girl on his own]

Bill: *"Oh go on then. Here's two bob."* [Puts the rest into his trouser pocket]

Susan: *"Thank you, thank you. Love you."* [Gives him a hug over his shoulders, steals the tea towel from his shoulder]

Bill: *"Don't forget to be home by ten."* [Points at his watch]

[Susan throws the tea towel in his face and leaves through the front door, leaving it open]

Option 2: Flashback 1966 - Going Steady with Dennis

Dennis is 22 years old, Susan is 17. It's 1966. They are in love, but unmarried.

[Dennis is leaning against a wall. Looks for Susan]

Dennis: *"She's going to love this record. I'll just have a quick look to check it's not scratched."*
[Gets it out carefully] *"Is that a bit of dust?"* [Wipes on trousers and puts it away. Wanders down to DSR, fiddling with record. Kicks a stone offstage right] *"Oh no, I've got muck on my shoe now."*
[Wipes it on back of leg. Sits on the bench to check shoe's ok. As he leans down to look after his shoe, he goes into 'minor' for Susan's entrance]

[Susan runs in from USL. Drops bag]

Susan: *"Dennis!"* [Dennis looks round, they hold out their arms and Susan runs to him. Embrace. Dennis spins her round. They hold hands and stare into each other's eyes]

Dennis: *"I've got something for you!"* [Sits her down and gives her the record]

Susan: *"Oh wow, that's fantastic!"* [Gets the record out with her fingers all over it]

Susan: *"Oh wow!! This is so good!"* [Turning it over] *"I was going to get this one!"* [Pointing at it]

Dennis: *"Woah, woah you've got to be careful! See it's got your fingerprints all over it now."*
[Wipes it on trousers]

Susan: *"Oh, ok, sorry!"* [Dennis takes it off her gently and slides it into the packet seductively with one finger. They look at each other and giggle]

Susan: *"Oh, I've got something to show you."* [Gets up and gets handbag, puts record in it] *"Now look at these....ta da!"* [She presents sexy 1960s shoes, puts them on and wiggles her feet]

Dennis: *"They're lovely, yeah."* [Susan puts one foot over Dennis's. Dennis does the same until their feet are entwined. Dennis puts arm round her]

Dennis: *"I love your hair."*

Susan: [Susan turns her back to him] *"Don't talk about my hair! I hate it, hate it!"*

Dennis: (to himself, feeling guilty) *"Oh no...what did I say wrong?"*
[Susan pulls out necklace from bag and puts it on]

Susan: [grumpy]: *"Oh! Look, look, aren't they lovely?!"*

Dennis: *"Ohh yes they are lovely! Are they... beads...?"* [moves hands gradually up the necklace. They move in for a kiss. Slow 'clock' out]

Susan: *"Perhaps we shouldn't kiss here..."* [Drags Dennis off USL] *"Let's go behind that tree."*

SECTION 5: USEFUL THEATRE TERMS

Mask theatre, and theatre in general, has some specialist terms: knowing them will help you to understand the language of theatre better and enable you to analyse and discuss what you see more effectively. Here are a few of the most useful:

Mask theatre terms

Internal monologue

Audiences comment on how easy it must be for actors not to have to learn lines; this couldn't be further from the truth! We have scripts for all our productions, but they are very different from those conventionally used in theatre. The 'lines' that mask actors use are spoken internally, and this is called an 'internal monologue' or internal dialogue. We often rehearse by speaking the internal monologue out loud, with masks off.

Clocking

This is a technique intrinsic to mask acting, where the mask looks straight at the audience for a brief time. It is a moment of connection between the mask and the audience, and gives the viewer a chance to interpret what the mask is thinking.

Counter mask

This is when the actor plays the opposite emotion to the one written on the mask. Why? A mask that plays the same emotion will soon become boring and predictable. Counter mask is played through gesture, physicality and pace, and goes against the expression on the mask. This is often the moment when the audience think that an actor has changed their mask, or that their mask is moving.

Giving focus

As a basic rule, only one mask should have the focus at once on stage. To give the focus as an actor, look at where you want the focus of the audience to be. If you want to go unnoticed then you need to "disappear", for example; look down, keep still or even hide your mask behind a newspaper. This is also called being in major or minor.

Moments of stillness

All mask work needs moments of stillness. These moments give the audience time to interpret and absorb the action and story; it gives mask work definition, punctuation and clarity.

Moments of isolation

If the whole body is moving all the time, there will be no clarity or focus: bringing the movement down to a tiny detail can be extremely effective. By isolating movements, such as a finger or a foot, moments can be made much more poignant.

Keeping the mask alive

A mask becomes lifeless if it is kept still for too long. You need to keep it alive (with moments of punctuated stillness...it's a fine balance!).

Clarity of thought and intention

As with all acting, if you do not know exactly what you are thinking on stage then the audience has no chance of understanding it either. Always have a clear internal monologue.

General theatre terms

Upstage (US)

The part of the stage furthest from the audience

Downstage (DS)

The part of the stage nearest the audience

Stage left (SL)

The side of the stage on the actor's left when facing the audience

Stage right (SR)

The side of the stage on the actor's right when facing the audience

Wings

The areas to the sides of the stage which (usually) can't be seen by the audience

Flat

An oblong frame of timber, covered and painted, which forms part of the set

Tech

Short for technical rehearsal: a rehearsal specially held to get all technical effects right

Dress

Short for Dress Rehearsal: the rehearsal immediately before the first performance, usually without an audience present

Blocking

The placing of the actors' positions and where they go (their 'moves') in rehearsals

Special

A lighting term: a lantern used for a special effect, such as lighting a single actor in one place

Cans

Headset earpiece, microphone and beltpack used for communication and co-ordination of technical departments during a performance

Gauze

A loosely-woven cloth. When lit from the front, it is opaque; when lit from behind, transparent

Clearance

Message passed to Stage Management from the Front of House Manager that the house is ready for the performance to begin. Announced as 'We have Front of House Clearance'

Preset

Anything in position before the beginning of a scene or act (e.g. props placed on stage before the performance, lighting state on stage as the audience are entering)

Get-in

The process of moving set, props and other hardware into a theatre

Get-out

Moving an entire production out of the venue

SECTION 6: RESOURCES

Each Vamos Theatre production is rooted in real life stories, and huge amounts of research go into their making. As well as one-to-one interviews, we read books, articles, and online materials, and watch films and TV programmes. Here are a few of them; hopefully they will inspire your own theatre making too.

Films:

Poor Cow (1967)
Cathy Come Home (1966)
Magdalene Sisters (2002)
Sex and Lies (2004)
Scandal (1989)

Novels:

Without a Map Meredith Hall
The L shaped Room Lynne Reid Banks
Letters to Louise Pauline Collins
Lady Chatterley's Lover D. H. Lawrence
Love Child A.M. Torres

Plays:

Be My Baby Amanda Whittington

Historical reading:

Ban This Filth! Edited by Ben Thompson
Love Now, Pay Later: sex and religion in the fifties and sixties Nigel Yates

Youtube:

First man on the moon
Batman and Robin
Vietnamese War 1955-1975
The documentary "The Sixties: the decade that changed the world"

Music:

1960s protest music (Bob Dylan, John Lennon, Pete Seeger, Phil Ochs etc)
1960s UK pop music (Lulu, The Tremoloes, Sandy Nelson, The Beatles etc)

News Articles:

<http://www.theguardian.com/society/2013/oct/27/forced-adoption-mother-and-child-reunited>

SECTION 7: GET INVOLVED!

How to get involved with Vamos Theatre

There are several ways to get involved with us.

If you are between 9 and 13 and live local to Worcester, you can join our weekly Vamos Young People's Theatre. Find out more at

www.vamostheatre.co.uk/education-and-training

You can join our mailing list (you have to be over 18). Sign up from our Home Page at

www.vamostheatre.co.uk

Follow us on Facebook and Twitter

www.facebook.com/VamosTheatre

twitter.com/VamosTheatre (@VamosTheatre)

Occasionally we have work placements and apprentice positions for young people: contact us if you are interested in finding out more

www.vamostheatre.co.uk/contact-vamos/

Send us your comments

We'd love to hear from you, and to find out what you thought about *The Best Thing*. You can contact us in lots of ways:

We have an online Comments Book on our website

www.vamostheatre.co.uk/comments-book

You can contact us direct via our website Contact Form

www.vamostheatre.co.uk/contact-vamos/

You can get in touch with us via social media

www.facebook.com/VamosTheatre

twitter.com/VamosTheatre (@VamosTheatre)

You can write to us at:

Vamos Theatre
Worcester Arts Workshop
21 Sansome Street
Worcester
WR1 1UH