

PART THREE



DRAMATIC FORMS AND PERFORMANCE STYLES



- Chapter 8** Melodrama: just for the thrill
- Chapter 9** Comedy: it's all in the ... timing
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8

MELODRAMA: JUST FOR THE THRILL

WHY STUDY MELODRAMA?

Melodrama was once one of the most popular forms of theatrical entertainment and reached the peak of its popularity in the mid-to-late 19th century. Melodrama has its own particular types of plots, characters and situations. Studying melodrama helps us to identify and understand how popular theatre reinforced the social values of the time. We can still see the influences of melodrama plots and characters in popular entertainment today, including action and adventure films, and television dramas, which are sometimes called 'soap operas'. Studying melodrama also helps improve our understanding of the history of theatre and equips us with more skills to use in performance work.

This chapter is divided into the following units:

- 8.1 An overview of melodrama
- 8.2 Plot and dramatic structure in melodrama
- 8.3 Characters in melodrama
- 8.4 The melodrama acting style
- 8.5 Staging in melodrama
- 8.6 Performance task: time running out

OUTCOMES

In this chapter you will:

- investigate the origins and conventions of melodrama in Australia
- understand how melodramas reflected and reinforced the social values of the time
- explore and express a range of stock characters from traditional melodrama
- select and explore the use of vocal dynamics and movement to portray melodrama characters
- explore and practise the acting conventions of traditional melodrama
- create and manipulate tension through the melodrama plot device of 'time running out'.





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8.1 An overview of melodrama

[When studying nineteenth-century theatre] it is necessary to start with melodrama and the means of production because they defined and contained all nineteenth-century theatre; for a century melodrama remained the most popular form of entertainment.

Michael R. Booth – Theatre academic

A BRIEF HISTORY OF MELODRAMA

Melodrama developed into a theatrical form in about 1800, thanks to the French playwright René Charles Guilbert de Pixérécourt. It was a reaction against the theatre of the Restoration period of the late 1600s.

Melodrama was also influenced by the development of a new style in art, music and literature, called romanticism, through which people began to express their feelings in art. Melodrama was emotional theatre, and the melodrama plays of this period were tales of suffering, suspense, romance and evil deeds.

Live music was incorporated in melodrama performances to heighten the emotions of scenes, and was also used to indicate character entrances. Melodrama relied on full use of theatrical devices, special effects and dramatic scene changes, all aimed at thrilling and moving an audience.

MELODRAMA IN AUSTRALIA

The first Australian melodrama was written in Tasmania in 1834 and was called *The Bushrangers*. This play reflects our early convict history and romanticises the escape of a convict, Matthew Brady, and a number of other prisoners from the Macquarie Harbour penal settlement in Tasmania.

Most early Australian melodramas were adaptations of European plays. Later, in the 19th century, clearly identifiable Australian settings and characters were established. Typical characters included:

- bushrangers
- gold prospectors (also known as ‘diggers’)
- currency lads and lasses—young male and female characters who were notable for being born in Australia and reflected a freshness and independence that differed from their European counterparts, especially the currency lasses; the Australian heroine could ride, shoot and swim—she was a complete departure from the vulnerable, sweet, weak heroines of European melodrama
- bumbling Irish policemen for comic relief
- Indigenous Australian companions
- new chums—immigrants to Australia, usually from England, who were seen as being naïve about the way of life in Australia.

THE ACTOR-MANAGER

Actor-managers were in charge of their theatre companies and usually played the lead male role. The most famous Australian actor-managers were George Darrell, Alfred Dampier and Dan Barry. These actor-managers included some Australian stories in the



Northern Virginia
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Introduction to Theatre:
19th Century Melodrama

plays they performed, although plays from overseas playwrights were considered more popular than Australian plays.

The most popular Australian melodramas used the legend of Ned Kelly as the basis for the plot. One notable Australian melodrama is *Robbery Under Arms*, by Alfred Dampier and Garnet Walch, which blends a little of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* with the Ned Kelly story. It was produced in 1890, and although Kelly was hanged in 1881, the memory of his death was still fresh in the audience's minds. By 1914, the popularity of melodramas had faded due to the invention of motion pictures. In the period from 1834 to 1914, Australia had produced some 600 melodramas.

WHAT IS A MELODRAMA CONVENTION?

Identifying the conventions of a theatre style involves highlighting the distinctive aspects that make it different from other styles. The conventions of melodrama cover:

- plot and dramatic structure (how the play is put together)
- characters
- acting style
- staging.

COLLABORATE AND THINK CRITICALLY

- 1 Research theatre entertainment in Australia during the period 1850–1900 with a partner or in small groups. Report your findings to the class.
- 2 What kinds of stories appealed to audiences in this time period? Why?
- 3 Imagine that you are an actor–manager. Write a diary entry in which you describe a scene from a melodrama you have performed in.

8.2 Plot and dramatic structure in melodrama

THE MELODRAMA PLOT AND DRAMATIC STRUCTURE

The main purpose of melodramas was not credibility, but the capacity to ignite the audience's reactions. The basic moral behind melodramas was the struggle between good and evil, and the re-establishment of a morally correct and just society. Each play relied on extreme situations and extreme states of being; for example, justice versus revenge, honesty versus dishonesty, or innocence versus corruption. A traditional melodrama plot would include the following three elements:

- **Provocation** – the initial cause for setting the action in motion, often the jealousy or greed of a wicked character; for example, the evil landowner wants to marry the innocent daughter; if she refuses, he will evict her poor family from the property.
- **Pangs** – the sufferings of the good and innocent characters who are in conflict with the evil; for example, the distressed daughter reluctantly agrees to marry the evil landowner to help save her family.



HINT

Melodramas also incorporated the use of topical jokes, comic interludes and slapstick to attract audiences.



HINT

Slapstick is an energetic and physical form of comedy that can include falling, tripping, hiding, dropping things, bumping and chasing for comic effect.



HINT

Melodrama actors often played the same character type in all melodrama plays. In Australia, the actor-manager would often play the role of the hero.

- **Penalty** – that suffered by the wicked character for his or her evil ways in a last-minute reversal of fortune; for example, the hero arrives to save the day and reveals that the evil landowner had originally taken ownership of the land by deceiving the daughter’s drunken father, who is in fact the rightful owner.

COLLABORATE AND THINK CRITICALLY

- 1 To get an idea of the impact that melodramas had on 19th-century audiences, consider some of your favourite action or adventure films. Which features of them do you like in particular? Discuss and record these features.
- 2 What similarities are there between your favourite action and adventure films, and melodrama?

8.3 Characters in melodrama

MELODRAMA ‘STOCK CHARACTERS’

The characters in melodramas were not supposed to be lifelike, but they had to be identifiable types. These sorts of characters were standard and audiences expected to see types with which they were familiar. These are often referred to as ‘stock characters’.

The stock melodrama characters were:

- **Hero** – handsome, strong, brave, honest and reliable; status: middle class or higher
- **Heroine** – beautiful, courageous, innocent and vulnerable; status: middle class or higher
- **Villain** – cunning, without morals, dishonest, cruel and evil; status: middle class or higher
- **Villain’s accomplice** – usually provides comic relief because they are the bumbling sidekick; status: lower class
- **Faithful servant** – also provides comic relief, does the dirty work, usually discovers evidence against the villain; status: lower class
- **Maid servant** – traditionally a female character, lively, flirts with the faithful servant; status: lower class.

COLLABORATE AND THINK CRITICALLY

- 1 Find two pictures of characters from an adventure, superhero or action film that you think are good examples of melodrama stock characters. Use movie magazines, the Internet and your library to help in your research.
- 2 Underneath each picture, write a list of the personal qualities you feel best describe the character. Share your findings with the class.
- 3 Working with a partner or in a small group, identify how melodramas reinforced social values that discriminated against certain groups in society. Why did melodramas do this?
- 4 What are some of the limitations in terms of how men and women are represented in melodramas? Do you think these limitations still apply to actors today? Why or why not?
- 5 How and why should we challenge representations of groups of people that are limiting or discriminatory?

8.4 The melodrama acting style



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MELODRAMA ACTING STYLE

The melodrama acting style requires the use of strong facial expressions, large movements and gestures, and a clear and well-projected delivery of lines. This was considered the norm for actors in 19th-century melodramas. This style of acting seems unusual today, but audiences of this period took this form of theatre seriously, and would see the highly dramatic and meaningful gesture as part of a great actor's success.

Melodrama actors concentrated on 'showing' emotions more than feeling them. They were skilled in the use of facial expression and heightened body language to show particular emotions. Inflections in the voice and the use of gestures also gave the audience cues to react by either booing or cheering. Remember that there were no microphones at this time, so the actors felt that big gestures, exaggerated expressions and the use of full voice were needed to reach the back corners of the large theatres as well as rise above the noise of the audience.

MELODRAMA AND THE AUSTRALIAN AUDIENCE

By the end of the 19th century, Australia's population was concentrated largely in city centres. The discovery of gold encouraged an increase in population and an expansion of the major cities. New theatres were built and these could hold large audiences.

In Australia, theatres were initially operated under strong government control because they were regarded as dangerous places that encouraged crime. Performances attracted large audiences. The audiences were unruly and reflected a mixture of upper, middle and lower classes. The upper section of the theatre seating was often full of drunken young men who delighted in calling out to the actors on stage. It was not uncommon for most of the audience to be under the influence of alcohol as they watched the performance. Spectators hissed, threw fruit, and rioted when actors forgot lines. Actors encouraged audience interaction by often ad-libbing lines and telling bawdy jokes. They also encouraged audience members to cheer the hero, and to boo and hiss the villain. Audible gasps of shock, horror and surprise would be heard at moments of excitement and tension in the performance.



Cinemateca – *The Mothering Heart* (1913):
Drama Silent Film



CHALLENGE

Repeat the exercise and, each time you hold a pose, include a sound or word that you feel adds to your interpretation.

COLLABORATE AND THINK CRITICALLY

- 1 Explain how being aware of the audience and playing to the audience may influence the melodrama actor's use of vocal dynamics and movement.
- 2 Use the Internet to find melodrama music of the period. Share this with the class and discuss how it might add to the audience's enjoyment of the performance.

EXERCISE

MELODRAMA ACTING STYLE: DEMONSTRATING EMOTION

Walk through the room and, on the signal from your teacher, hold a pose for one of the following emotional states: evilness, innocence, courage, laziness, vulnerability, defiance, repentance, haughtiness, desperation, grief, lovesickness, territoriality and cruelty. Do not use sound. Focus your energy on communicating the emotional state through every part of your body, including your face. Repeat the exercise until you have practised all of the emotional states. Divide into two groups and show each person in your group four emotional states.

COLLABORATE AND THINK CRITICALLY

- 1 Identify those who you feel portrayed particular emotional states in the exercise well. Describe how they used body language to make their demonstration effective.
- 2 Explain three ways you could use body language to demonstrate emotion.

EXERCISE

MORROCHESI'S ACTING EXERCISES

The 19th-century actor Antonio Morrochesi believed that there was a mimed action corresponding to every word in a performance. Morrochesi was one of the first people to write a handbook for actors. He gave instructions for how actors should play various emotions and psychological states, such as love, jealousy, rage, anger, passion and insanity. Often an actor would use these gestures without even thinking. The following examples are from Morrochesi's book on acting.

Rage

Take off your hat, put it on, press it down in place, throw it on the ground, pick it up and tear it to pieces. Stride up and down restlessly: sometimes in a straight line, sometimes turning sharply. Every now and then run your hands through your hair. Unbutton your shirt and pause for a moment here and there. Bang hard with your fist on the furniture. Turn chairs upside down. Smash vases and crockery. Bang your fist against the back of your neck. Open and close doors. Throw yourself into a chair, bounce up and down on it, and then jump to your feet again.

Pride

Set one arm crossways over the breast; the other resting with the back of the hand on the hip and the elbow thrust forward. Hold your head high.

MELODRAMA CHARACTER TYPES

Now you have begun to explore body language and movement in the melodrama acting style, it is time to explore some stock melodrama character types.

EXERCISE

MELODRAMA CHARACTER ADDITION

As covered earlier in this chapter, three of the common melodrama character types are:

- **Hero** – brave, honest, fair-minded and strong
- **Villain** – deceitful, evil, cruel, sneaky, sly and untrustworthy
- **Heroine** – virtuous, sweet, innocent, vulnerable, honest and trustworthy.

1 Creating melodrama character types

Work through the following steps:

- Adopt a frozen pose.
- Add a walk or stride that clearly represents the character's personality.
- Add a mannerism or gesture that is representative of the character's personality.
- Add a sound, word or phrase that you feel represents the character's personality.

2 Creating Australian melodrama character types

Explore how these Australian melodrama characters might be portrayed differently to the European version of stock melodrama characters. Explore physical and vocal portrayals of the following Australian melodrama characters. Use the steps listed to build each character.

- **The digger (a gold prospector)** – rough, loyal, fair-minded and honest
- **The Australian heroine** – strong, feminine, confident and outspoken
- **The evil bushranger** – rough, cunning, ruthless and cruel.

3 Playing to the audience

Each person in the class chooses a melodrama character they enjoyed playing. Each person presents his or her character in front of the class. The class cheers or boos the character accordingly. The performer should be aware of the audience's reactions and improvise the character's response.



COLLABORATE AND THINK CRITICALLY

- 1 Pick two characters that you felt were strong representations of the character types. Describe how the performers used the drama skills of body language, gesture, vocal dynamics and focus to create an effective character type.



HINT

Undertake voice warm-up exercises (chapter 1, pp. 21–24) before you start the following exercises.

MELODRAMA CHARACTER AND VOCAL DYNAMICS

Saying lines in the melodrama acting style requires very strong vocal projection and the use of emphasis. This can be achieved by using your breath to create a more powerful delivery and by choosing certain words or syllables to say in a special way. Emphasis can also be achieved through consideration of the elements of vocal dynamics: pace, rhythm, pitch, volume and pauses. The following exercises will help you practise this.

EXERCISE

MELODRAMA CHARACTER LINES

Try saying the following lines, adding special emphasis where letters are in upper case. As you practise, find a mimed action for the words you emphasise. The lines should be said with full emotion and at full voice.

HEROINE I am INnocent. You are so crOOOEL (*cruel*).

HERO YOU have entered this home like a WOOLF (*wolf*) and TORN from her mother's arms the HOPE of her old age. I should SEEEZ (*seize*) you by the throat, and DASH you PROSTRATE to the earth, as TOO FOWEL (*foul*) a carcass to walk erect and MOCK the name of man.

HEROINE No mother, I canNOT marry Charles. It would BREAK my heart to do so and I would surely DIE!

HERO I STER-RUCK (*struck*) him down.



HINT

Repeat these lines, but add a 'roll' to all the underlined 'R' sounds.

COLLABORATE AND THINK CRITICALLY

- 1 Identify the dominant emotion that each character is feeling in each line they say.
- 2 Describe the body gestures and facial expressions you used to help communicate the emotion of each line.
- 3 Describe how one other group member delivered their line in a way that you felt met the requirements of the melodrama acting style. Comment specifically on their use of body language and vocal dynamics.
- 4 Why did melodrama performers use stylised voice and movement to portray their characters?

EXERCISE

ASIDES

In an aside, a character speaks directly to the audience to reveal a thought or plan that is kept secret from the other characters. The performer's delivery of an aside should establish a feeling of secrecy and draw the audience's focus from the general action to the performer delivering the aside.

Try performing the following villain's aside, which reveals his secret thoughts. To add to the feeling of secrecy, put a hand to one side of your mouth, with the fingers together and the palm cupped and facing down. Try to pick the words that need to be emphasised.





The villain's aside precedes a line where he pretends he is sorry for what he has done and refuses to kill the defenceless hero. This will require a swift change of body language, vocal delivery and facial expression: from the delivery of the aside to the delivery of the line.

VILLAIN *(Aside)* First I shall gain his confidence, and then I shall take what is rightly mine!

The actor playing the villain changes the emotion that is portrayed by altering body language and vocal delivery.

(To the hero) No! Too much of your blood is upon my head! Be justly revenged: take mine!



COLLABORATE AND THINK CRITICALLY

- 1 When delivering the aside, how did you use body language and voice to create a feeling of secrecy and to manipulate the character's relationship with the audience?
- 2 How did you change your use of body language and voice from the delivery of the aside to the delivery of the line to the hero?

EXERCISE

MELODRAMA CHARACTER LINES

Divide into pairs. Write one line for each of the following stock characters: hero, villain and heroine. On a piece of paper, indicate which character says the line and whether or not it is an aside, and underline any words or syllables for emphasis. Put all the lines written by all pairs into a hat or box. Everyone takes a line from the hat and is given a couple of minutes to practise their line. Each person then delivers his or her line with appropriate character body language, gesture and use of emphasis.

EXERCISE

MODERN MELODRAMA PARODY

In pairs or in small groups, choose one of the following situations to devise and present to the class.

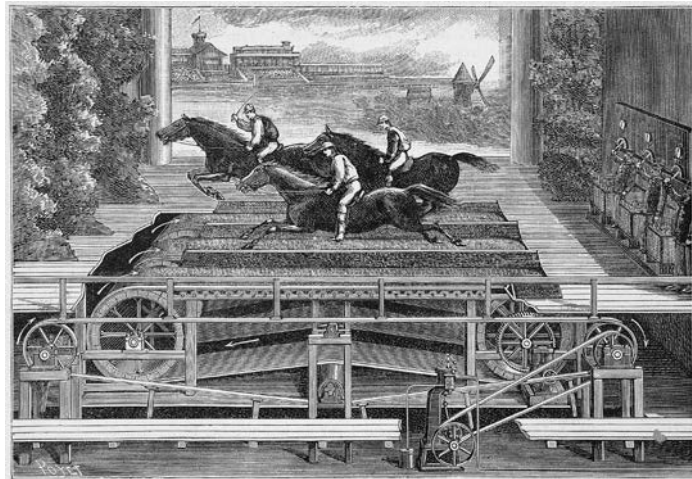
- Trying to persuade a parent to let you go out.
- Being caught by a teacher and punished.
- Two lovers on a date telling each other how in love they are.
- A bully caught picking on a student who is then saved by the school sports hero or heroine.

The situation should be short. You are encouraged to use your acting skills and to manipulate the elements of drama to make fun of the limitations of this style of theatre. Using the element of drama focus to frame the action, you might choose to emphasise in your melodrama how the representation of women was stereotyped. The emphasis in this exercise is the use of melodramatic body language and the use of melodramatic delivery set in a contemporary situation. Plan and rehearse your scene before you present it to the class.

8.5 Staging in melodrama

WHAT DID MELODRAMAS LOOK LIKE?

Melodramas in the late 1800s had the benefit of being staged in theatres with the machinery and equipment to create the required elaborate settings and effects. Fly towers and counterweight systems allowed backdrops and scenery to be hidden and revealed from the area above the stage. Scenic artists created familiar, local settings for Australian melodramas. Their aim was to re-create settings as accurately as possible. The increased use of electric stage lighting, rather than gas lighting, also added to the visual effects.



Cross-section of a stage showing the treadmills and moving panorama used to stage a horse race

SENSATION MELODRAMAS

By the late 1800s, a particular type of melodrama called ‘sensation melodrama’ had gained popularity. In sensation melodramas, the highlight of the performance was the moment of sensation when some disaster or catastrophe would occur—be it a flood, avalanche, fire, earthquake, explosion, death or murder along with other general mayhem. The originator of sensation melodrama, Dion Boucicault, had real fire engines extinguish a real fire set in an apartment building in his production of *The Poor of New York*.

Australian melodramas reflected this trend. In *The Sunny South*, by George Darrell, a train is derailed on stage. In *Robbery Under Arms*, by Alfred Dampier, a stagecoach is driven onto the stage and is hijacked by bushrangers. Another performance in Melbourne re-created a horse race by having horses run across the stage, out one side door of the theatre, up the lane behind the theatre and in through the other side door—all to give the realistic impression of a horse race at high speed.

COLLABORATE AND THINK CRITICALLY

- 1 List three famous, popular blockbuster films or stage musicals that use spectacular effects.
- 2 Describe the spectacular effects used in the performances you listed. What did they add to the dramatic impact of the performance?
- 3 What is a sensation melodrama?

PERFORMANCE TASK



8.6 Performance task: time running out

The task

In groups, devise a climactic scene from a melodrama. The scene should be a climactic moment where the hero rescues the heroine from the evil clutches of the villain. The moment should use the device of 'time running out' to add tension to the scene. You could use a stopwatch or a visible clock with a second hand to give you a genuine feeling of having to rescue someone quickly. Do not rush the action. Sometimes it is better to slow the action almost completely at the climactic moment so it seems that time hangs in the air. This is usually the moment when we think the hero is about to die and all is lost.

Here are some ideas of climactic scenes involving a heroine being rescued:

- The heroine is tied to the train track. The hero and the villain struggle as the train approaches.
- The heroine dangles from a frayed rope over a cliff face. The flame of a burning candle threatens to break the rope.
- The heroine is trapped in a burning house and the door is locked from the outside.

You must also include the use of asides in your performance, as well as the use of distinct poses and gestures to express the emotion of the character's lines. In performance, you must play to the audience and encourage their reactions to particular events on stage.



HINT

Melodramas used live music to heighten the atmosphere of the performance. You may like to incorporate an appropriate piece of music to accompany your performance. Melodrama music can be easily sourced online.



HINT

It is helpful for the audience to boo or cheer appropriately during the performance. This will encourage the performers to play to the audience.



Shutterstock/Timothy O'Leary

What are some typical characteristics of a melodrama villain?

Creating and making a melodrama

- Brainstorm the characters and situations for your climactic scene. You may think of examples from adventure or action films.
- Consider how dialogue can use emphasis to suit the melodrama acting style.
- Identify the climactic moment.
- Consider ways you can build tension through the use of sound effects.
- Consider ways you can control the building of tension through the action of the scene.

Performance checklist

You and your teacher will evaluate your work individually using a list of criteria. These criteria relate to your achievement in this task. Some criteria will relate to the achievement of the group.

The criteria are listed on the evaluation sheet at the end of this chapter and will be used to evaluate your ability to:

- select and incorporate body language and movement in the melodrama acting style
- select and incorporate voice in a melodrama acting style
- sustain and develop character in performance
- select and incorporate stylised body language to express the emotion of character lines
- include and deliver asides
- manipulate the actor–audience relationship to encourage the audience’s involvement
- create and control tension
- highlight the climactic moment
- incorporate your knowledge and understanding of melodrama into your own performance work.



HINT

Building tension works best if you start your performance at a moderate pace and with a moderate level of intensity, and build the pace and intensity as you move towards the climactic moment.

COLLABORATE AND THINK CRITICALLY

- 1 Evaluate one group’s performance. Describe their strengths in the use of body language.
- 2 How did the group create and maintain tension in their performance?
- 3 Evaluate your own presentation. Outline your strengths in the melodrama acting style. Use examples from your own performance to support your evaluation.
- 4 Evaluate your ability to include awareness of your audience into your melodrama performance. Describe examples where you or another performer interacted with the audience to heighten the performance.
- 5 Give two examples of how melodrama has influenced popular entertainment today. Draw a table that shows a comparison between melodrama and your examples. In the table, include comparisons of character, plot, settings and acting style.
- 6 What made Australian melodrama different to European melodrama?
- 7 Describe the kind of actor–audience relationship you would expect at a melodrama performance.
- 8 Why were melodramas so popular in the late 19th century? Research the social beliefs, politics and entertainment of this period to help write your answer.



Performance task: time running out

Student Teacher

Group names

By completing this task you should be able to:

- investigate the origins and conventions of melodrama in Australia
- understand how melodramas reflected and reinforced the social values of the time
- explore and express a range of stock characters from traditional melodrama
- select and explore the use of vocal dynamics and movement to portray melodrama characters
- explore and practise the acting conventions of traditional melodrama
- create and manipulate tension through the melodrama plot device of 'time running out'.

Key learning areas	Level of achievement			
	Beginning	Consolidating	Mastering	Excelling
<p>Creating, making and presenting ideas using skills, knowledge, techniques and processes:</p> <p>Have you incorporated melodrama acting conventions by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • creating a stock melodrama character type? • delivering lines with appropriate emphasis on certain words? • using asides to communicate your character's thoughts? • playing to the audience to encourage their involvement? • representing your character's personality through appropriate choice of body language and movement? • incorporating suitable body language to show the emotion of your character's lines? • sustaining and developing character in performance? <p>Have you rehearsed and presented a performance for a specific audience by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • incorporating the conventions of melodrama? • structuring the drama into a coherent and polished performance using effective scene transitions? • manipulating and maintaining tension? 				
<p>Responding:</p> <p>Have you used your critical thinking and communication skills to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • effectively reflect on the development, rehearsal and shaping of a melodrama performance? • question and interrogate the social purpose of melodramas in terms of characters and plot? • show strong knowledge of the history and development of melodrama as a popular form of entertainment? 				

Comments
