

EDUCATION & RESOURCES PACK

LIFE OF PI



WRITING ABOUT LIVE PRODUCTIONS

WRITING ABOUT LIVE PRODUCTIONS

**“Nature can put on a thrilling show. The stage is vast,
the lighting is dramatic, the extras are innumerable,
and the budget for special effects is absolutely unlimited...
I was a spectator safely ensconced in his seat”¹**

This pack is intended for students and teachers when preparing to write about live productions at GCSE and A Level. It should be used in conjunction with Pack 1 (Interviews), Pack 2 (Spotlight on Puppetry), Pack 3 (Classroom Activities) and Pack 4 (Careers).

Writing about live productions can be challenging because there is so much detail that needs to be included. This pack explores:

CONTENTS

04 | Performance

05 | Puppetry

06 | Lighting design

08 | Sound design

10 | Projection design

11 | Set design

PERFORMANCE



Photo by Johan Persson

Reflection point:

Note the use of levels and use of space in this scene. In this scene, Pi is explaining what happened to Mr Okamoto and Lulu Chen. How does each performer communicate their sense of status and emotion in this scene? How does the actor playing Pi communicate the trauma and unease that he is experiencing? Why has the director chosen to have Lulu and Mr Okamoto standing either side of the bed? How has the director ensured that Pi is the key focus for the audience in this scene?

Hiran Abeysekera, who plays Pi, says, “I’d like the audience to engage with Pi to the point that they think as him. He is curious, he never stops asking questions, and so they should approach with that curiosity. Answers are cool, but they stop you asking questions!”

In the hospital scenes, it is challenging for the performers to maintain a pace that has been created by the dramatic scenes at sea. They must create a different dynamic of mood and atmosphere in scenes that are much more dialogue based, in contrast to the puppetry and physical theatre that takes place at sea.

Payal Mistry, who plays Rani, tells us, “It was challenging to create the sibling dynamic between Rani and Pi. There is a loving relationship there, and it’s important to highlight that before the tragedy on the *Tsimtsum*.” Early in the play the actors playing Pi’s family, and the local religious leaders, must work hard to create a strong sense of the world that Pi’s family are leaving behind. Use of physical, vocal and facial expressions are vital in doing this effectively. Remember that a number of the cast also multi-role and so must develop very clear gestures and mannerisms to delineate between their different roles.

PUPPETRY



Photo by Johan Persson

Reflection point:

Take note of the focus of the eyeline of the actors operating the puppet of Richard Parker. Look at their eyeline. Can you observe their facial expressions? What does this tell the audience about the feelings of the animal at this moment in the play? How did the puppeteers use their own breath to bring the puppet of Richard Parker to life through physical theatre and movement? How did the puppeteers make the movements convincing in the moments leading up to the movement (for example, before Richard Parker jumped)?

Use Pack 2 to help you understand more about the way in which the puppets were designed and operated.

Key moments you may wish to discuss are:

- The first scene in the zoo, when the animals are introduced
- Richard Parker and the goat
- The interaction between Pi and Orange-Juice (the orangutan)
- The zebra, including the scene in which he breaks his leg
- The interaction between Pi and Richard Parker at the beginning of their journey, in the tiger taming scene, when Richard Parker speaks, and the final time that Pi sees him.
- The use of object puppetry and the 'fish ballet'.

LIGHTING



Photo by Johan Persson

Reflection point:

The lighting design in the *Life of Pi* creates a clear sense of place, time and atmosphere. As an example, look to the image of the zoo scene below and observe the colours, the tones, the intensity and the shapes used. What lighting effects can you see being used here? What atmosphere does the overall colour palette create? How does this add to the set design concept for this moment in the play?

Tim Lutkin explains, “The creation of the hospital location takes place even before the play begins. The house lights are on and the pre-set evokes the stark, cold environment in which Pi finds himself. It’s not luxurious, it’s not somewhere that’s pleasant to be. When the Nurse arrives with the chair, the houselights go out and we use cold, white specials and follow spots. The white tones highlight the cleanliness and sterility of the location. This is a stark contrast to the zoo and the market scenes, which are much warmer and more welcoming. The bed is backlit – it’s the only piece of furniture in the hospital scene.

As the market scene opens the people are in silhouette to evoke a sense of a new location, movement and time passing. There’s no front light on anyone at that point. We’re gently pulling back the different layers of where we are. Once the scene is established we use the backlight – we use a heavy sculpted back light (called the key light) and we draw the energy of that scene from that state, and here it’s a deep orangey amber. This is an unusual colour to choose – usually we would use a lighter straw colour for the daytime setting but this is a nod to the fantasy element of the story.

The most down stage lighting bar has moving lights which have a textured gobo which is a broken hessian texture. They're softly focussed – the texture encourages your eyes to move around and look at different things rather than fixing on one thing.

The creation of the storm is a complete collaboration between lighting and video. On the back wall is a projection of rain that runs at about 30° angle on the back wall. We always angle 'rain' – vertical strips don't look realistic. The projection suggests the direction in which the rain is coming. On the floor is the projection of the sea, which gets increasingly choppy and violent. It's supported with smoke and haze, Pi is lit with a follow spot, and the lighting also creates the lightning flashes. The collaboration between lighting and projection is vital – if you were to just use projection it doesn't feel real."

SOUND



Photo by Johan Persson

Reflection point:

You can explore this moment in your own drama studio or at home. Can you find several different pieces of music, each contrasting in mood? What happens when you look to this image, or a physical recreation of this image whilst playing the different pieces of music? Does the difference in music evoke different feelings and responses from the viewer/audience?

Carolyn Downing, the production's Sound Designer, says, "The massive challenge was the storm. It needs to sound dangerous and very real. The entire company is mic'd, and there is a very rich soundtrack so it is a full collaboration between me and Andrew (T. Mackay, composer). When I was designing the sound for the production, I found a lot of different water sounds – it's not enough to just use one throughout the show. I had to research different types of waves and different sounds of water lapping a surface. We also use recorded bird calls, and the company create the vocalisations for the puppets. It's a rich and diverse sound palette.

It is vital that we are economical with sound – it needs to be varied. We had to find the moments where sound would build, and those moments where the characters are jolted in the boat, and that's where we'd place emphasis in the sound. The score is actually cinematic in its scale at times (Andrew composes a lot of film scores). These moments have to be integrated with the video and lighting too – all of those elements are working together."

There are more than 80 speakers in this production, some of which are located on stage and some which are located in the auditorium. There are a number of tiny speakers under the floor of the stage that help locate some of the sounds in a fairly naturalistic way – the sound comes from the place where an action happens, for example dropping something in the water.

Andrew T Mackay's soundtrack also supports the mood, atmosphere and setting of the play. His composition includes instruments such as the Indian flute and the tabla, as well as instruments that you may be more familiar with such as brass, percussion and string instruments. The tiger taming scene needed to communicate the fear and the challenge within the lifeboat as Pi tries to overcome the tiger and become dominant. The soundtrack was composed for orchestra and recorded.

Andrew tells us, "listen carefully for three moments that use soundtrack for dramatic effect. The first is the tiger taming scene, the next is the scene with the turtle which turns a joyous moment into a sad one and where the music is gentle, melodic and dreamlike. The third moment is Pi's arrival in Mexico, where we use the Indian flute to create a beautifully poignant moment."

PROJECTION



Photo by Johan Persson

Reflection point:

What would the audience response to this moment onstage have been if there were no video or projection? Do you think it would have been as effective? How would the effect have been different?

Andrzej Goulding tells us, “The boat is lit by a projector from above, and Tim (Lutkin – Lighting Designer) had control over the intensity and colour of that light. The lighting always tracks with the boat. We also mix in a follow spot to ensure that Pi, and other inhabitants of the boat, can be seen.”

Projection is also used in the hospital scene, but it is used so subtly that it's easy to miss it. The grey tiled floor is created by video, and you'll perhaps notice that at times water starts to appear on those tiles. This is something that helps with the transitions between the scenes in the hospital and those in the boat.

In the original production at the Sheffield Crucible, the fact that the audience looks down on to the stage meant that the floor became an integral part of the design concept. For the London transfer, the floor of the auditorium was raised to allow the audience a similar experience.

SET DESIGN



Photo by Johan Persson

Reflection point:

As an example, look at the image of the market scene above and observe the colour scheme and the fabrics used. What colour is Pi wearing? Is this in contrast to the other characters in the scene? What atmosphere does the overall colour palette create? How does this add to the set design concept for this moment in the play?

Tim Hatley explains,

“This scene follows a scene in the hospital, and we had to achieve an entirely different look. You’ll notice the use of different levels, and the lighting is a rich amber wash which is completely different to the tones of the hospital. We’ve layered as much colour on the staged as possible, using different textures of fabric, an array of colour and paraphernalia on every surface possible. There are no puppets in this scene, but we’ve populated the market with performers to get a sense of busy-ness.

The transition from the hospital to this market scene needed to be fast and to retain a fluidity and beauty. The transition included the use of automation – the back wall moved – it’s like the opening of a book.

Costume also allows us to give information about setting. Rugs and moveable pieces of set such as the cart and the crates allow us to fill and shape the space”

In this photograph you can also see some of the details in the stage such as the revolve and areas that will facilitate the appearance and disappearance of the boat. You will also notice that the front of the stage is built out into the auditorium slightly.

You can create a clear contrast between the market scene which is bright and colourful, and the hospital room which is grey and bare. It is designed to suggest a hot climate, there are large windows with shutters, which suggest that for example. The back wall of the hospital opens out to become the market which aids a rapid transition – the story must not break its pace so set design is integral to successfully maintaining that rapid pace so that the audience fully engages with the story. The fact that the pre-set allows the audience to see the hospital before the performance starts makes us feel that we have entered the hospital too and are waiting for Pi's story to begin.

The creation of the boat is a complex operation! The stage floor is one metre deep and inside is a revolve, which also involves a lift and trapdoors which allow the boat to appear and then retract back under the stage. The stage was constructed by specialist set builders and is a combination of woodwork and automation (which involves computer systems being able to communicate between set, lighting and sound). There are also two trapdoors (one downstage left and one downstage right which appear solid for the majority of the performance). The revolve allows the boat to point in different directions – we see the boat in profile which also allows the puppetry to be more varied and unpredictable.

There are also other elements such as the life buoy that is operated by two performers with ropes. They stand at either sides of the stage, whilst Pi sits in it, and create the impression that he is moving on the waves. The inclusion of more simple storytelling techniques encourage the audience to engage even more in the fantasy of the story, and prevent it simply being a predictable spectacle which is always a risk when a lot of technology is involved.

Tim Hatley designed both set and costumes for Life of Pi. Notice that most of the colourful costumes are used in the market scene before Pi's family leave for Canada. There is a vibrancy and beauty in the colours used which then contrast sharply to the white of Pi's simple costume of white undershirt and wide legged trousers that he wears for most of the performance. The men in the market scene wear an achkan or Nehru jacket which has a mandarin-style collar, or waistcoats over tunics. The women wear saris in various different colours. Notice that Rani's sari is made up of complementary pastel colours, whereas her Mother and Mrs Biology Kumar's are much deeper colours that we would associate with older females.

For each statement, identify your confidence in each of the skills.

Green = completely confident

Amber = with support I can do this

Red = I cannot do this

For those skills that you identify as red or amber, what next steps do you need to take to move towards green?

Production Element	"I can" statements	Green	Amber	Red
ACTING				
I can...	Explain how the character of Pi was created through the use of vocal, facial expression in at least 3 moments in the production			
	Describe how a relationship between Pi and Lulu Chen was created through the use of space, levels and eye contact			
	Evaluate how the actor playing Pi interacted with performers playing other members of his family			
	Evaluate the way in which a performer delivered his monologue about his arrival on the shore of Mexico towards the end of the play			
	I can explain how physical theatre aided the storytelling in at least one scene in the play			
	Explain how actors used their skills to create various different character (multi-roling)			
PUPPETRY				
I can...	Describe in detail the orangutan puppet, and a key scene in which it was used			
	Describe Richard Parker in detail, and a key scene in which the puppet was used			
	Describe the zebra in detail, and a key scene in which the puppet was used			
	Describe the goat in detail, and a key scene in which the puppet was used			
	Explain how the turtle puppet was used in a key scene			
	Describe how an actor interacted with a puppet to create a convincing relationship			
	Use my knowledge of puppetry skills to analyse their application in <i>Life of Pi</i>			

Production Element	"I can" statements	Green	Amber	Red
SET				
I can...	Explain and evaluate the stage configuration for the production			
	Describe and evaluate the set design for the hospital, including the use of projection			
	Describe and evaluate the set design for the zoo, including the use of projection			
	Describe and evaluate the set design for the boat, including the use of projection			
	Explain how the set design used technology and engineering to create key scenes in the play			
	I can evaluate how the set design aided swift transitions between scenes in the play			
COSTUME				
I can...	Describe the costume worn by Pi and how it created a sense of character and narrative			
	Describe Mr Okamoto and Lulu Chen's costumes and evaluate how they communicated their characters			
	Explain and evaluate the costumes worn by Pi's family to give a sense of character and a sense of location and culture			
	Explain the costumes worn by the puppeteers and how that aided the audience's suspension of disbelief			
LIGHTING				
	Describe how lighting created a sense of setting, mood and atmosphere at the beginning of the performance			
	Explain and evaluate how lighting was used to create a vibrant setting in the market scene			
	Explain and evaluate how lighting was used in two key moments in the boat, to create mood and atmosphere			

Production Element	"I can" statements	Green	Amber	Red
PROJECTIONS				
I can...	Describe how projection was used to enhance the set in the hospital scenes			
	Use technical terminology to describe the equipment used to create projections			
	Describe how projections were used to create mood and atmosphere in the storm sequence			
	Explain and evaluate how projections created a sense of mood and atmosphere in one scene in the play			
SOUND				
I can...	Describe and evaluate the use of musical soundtrack in three key scenes in the play			
	Describe how recorded sound was used to create mood and atmosphere in the storm sequence			
	Explain how the actors contributed to the successful use of sound in the play by using their own voices and vocalisations			