

Half Moon

USING *BLOWBACK* FOR EDEXCEL DRAMA GCSE PAPER 1, UNIT 2

The play, follow up workshop and the materials in this pack are all designed to support your delivery of EdExcel Drama GCSE paper 1, unit 2.

On the performance day you will also receive a CD of the soundtrack for every pupil. The CD insert will act as a programme and will have suggestions for website and helpline support that young people can access in relation to the play's themes.

The follow up workshop will be a practical drama session that explores some of the play's themes and its performance conventions. The workshop will also use music from the soundtrack.

This pack includes a full working script of *Blowback* by Emily Nightingale and:

1. A synopsis of the play.
2. A scene-by-scene breakdown.
3. A note on the main themes and issues of the play, including a quote from the writer and a suggestion of scenes to explore different themes.
4. Some suggested exercises to support AO1, AO2 and AO4.

A thought

Blowback is a powerful and moving theatre piece. It includes scenes of drug use, racist violence and a pivotal moment when a baby falls from a tower block. It would be useful to decide whether you let your students read the whole script before seeing the play, in order to prepare them for some of the more powerful moments, or not to read the whole script in order to maximise the dramatic effect.

1 A Synopsis

It is the year 2020 and another relentlessly hot summer in Stepney. Paul is 20 years old, unemployed and spends most of his time on the roof of his flats smoking skunk. Paul's girlfriend Sufia thinks that he smokes too much and tries to persuade him to stop. When Sufia gets a place on a scheme that funds people to go to college she decides to leave Paul and make a new start in Manchester. Paul is devastated by Sufia's departure but numbs the pain by smoking even more. He doesn't go out and is isolated from his community. He gave up his friends because they beat him up for being with an Asian girl. From his roof Paul watches his old best friend become increasingly racist and violent. He can also see his younger sister Leah, who is mixed race, getting closer to him and his gang. Left alone, Paul becomes isolated and despondent and the more he smokes the more the boundaries of his reality blur. Leah is 16 years old and has a baby called Calum who Paul often looks after. One day Paul and Calum are on the roof. Paul smokes a strong spliff and his mind drifts away. He then remembers the baby and turns around just in time to see him crawl off the edge of the roof. Paul sees Calum's body lying face down on the ground below him. From that moment Paul's life changes forever, as he knows he can't stay where he is. He goes to the Job Centre and is given the chance to work on a space ship that is on a mission to find new energy resources. He is given four months to get fit for the programme. Paul smokes less and trains hard. Sufia, who is disillusioned with college, hates the thought of a world without Paul. She tries to get him to stay. Leah doesn't speak to Paul after the accident, but the loss of her baby forces her to come to terms with who she is. Eventually she is able to visit Paul to say goodbye. Paul goes up to space and looks down at the earth. He realises that although he will never go back it will be part of him forever.

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2 Scene by Scene Breakdown of *Blowback* by Emily Nightingale

Scene 1

Paul, Sufia and Leah look out over Stepney in the year 2020.

Scene 2

Paul remembers the first time he met Sufia. Sufia is on the roof taking a break from a family party, she is surprised to see a white boy there; "This is an Asian block".

Scene 3

Paul and Sufia remember their first impressions. Sufia remembers "these sad eyes...". Paul remembers thinking "I never thought I would fancy an Asian girl."

Scene 4

Paul remembers their second meeting, on the roof, smoking spliff and talking about people they know. They continue to meet. They see Paul's sister Leah, with her baby and Tattoo Steve. They see Sufia's dad returning to her mum after seeing his "dumb white girlfriend". They know that people won't approve of them being together.

Scene 5

We see Leah working in her allotment with baby Calum. He is crying, she is trying to calm him down; she wants him to stop crying before 'Uncle Steve' arrives.

Scene 6

Sufia remembers the first time she kissed Paul. She remembers the river rising and breaking its banks. Paul remembers being happy with Sufia on the roof; no jobs, no school, signing on and looting for food. Then it changed when Tattoo Steve and his mates turned on him, beat him up for being a "paki lover"; Paul stops going out.

Scene 7

Paul and Leah are on the roof arguing about racism, he wants her to stop seeing Tattoo Steve who is racist and she wants him to stop seeing Sufia because she is Asian. Sufia arrives; Leah blames her for Paul getting beaten up. Sufia is going away to Manchester. Paul is alone on the roof with Calum. He is smoking spliff that Leah gave him. He imagines that Sufia is still with him.

Scene 8

Sufia remembers Paul's growing apathy and his increasing drug use. She gets a letter offering her a place in Manchester studying geography and when Paul won't come with her she decides to go alone.

Scene 9

Paul is on the roof, he imagines he can see his mum with her boyfriend 'Racist Dave' and his dad up in Scotland, they don't see him. Leah is in the allotment; she remembers that only Tattoo Steve came to see her after Calum was born.

Scene 10

Leah brings Paul some vegetables, some weed and baby Calum to look after. Paul is up on the roof. Leah wants Paul to move back with her, 'Tattoo Steve' has been telling her that the Bengalis and the Somalis are the enemy. Paul stays where he is.

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Scene 11

Paul is on the roof; he is smoking spliff and looking after Calum.

Sufia is in Manchester. Student life is hard; those on grants are second-class citizens to those who pay their own way.

A street fight distracts Paul. Baby Calum has walked to the edge of the roof and Paul watches him fall thirteen floors to his death.

Sufia sees a bright orange flame and senses that Paul is in trouble.

Scene 12

Paul is on his roof; he watches all the lights go out at midnight. He imagines Sufia and Leah shouting and questioning him about the baby; he can see Calum whether his eyes are open or closed.

Scene 13

Paul decides he can no longer stay. He goes to the job centre; he applies for a job and meets a man who gives him a piece of the moon to hold.

Scene 14

Leah is in the allotment digging a pond in memory of Calum. She is talking to Calum and telling him how people let them down.

Scene 15

Sufia has returned to see Paul. He tells her about his job, he is training to be a pioneer travelling to Alpha Centauri; he won't ever return.

Scene 16

Paul is revising for his exams, Leah is behind him humming, distracting him, asking him questions about what happens to a baby if it falls in space. Paul carries on revising. Leah continues humming.

Scene 17

Paul is alone, he imagines floating in space with Calum. He leaves Leah a note telling her that he is going away, apologising, and saying that he loves her.

Scene 18

Sufia comes to see Paul on the roof. Paul has passed his training and is leaving; Sufia has a job and a friend in Manchester. Paul asks her to go with him; she has things to do here. They spend the last night together.

Scene 19

Leah is working in the allotment. Sufia comes to see her.

Scene 20

Leah comes to see Paul. She takes some responsibility for Calum's death. They look out, beyond Stepney to Ghana where her dad lives. They share a last spliff.

Scene 21

Paul, Sufia and Leah look down at the earth from space.

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3 Themes and Issues

What do you think are the main themes and issues in *Blowback*?

Emily Nightingale

"There is a lot in it; the underlying theme of global warming, apathy, relationships, a divided society, identity and racism. Obviously there is the drugs use; skunk. There is also all the reference to space; inner space, external space as well as outer space. The play is also about remembering and imagining, which is part of our inner space."

Drug Use

- Scene 4. Paul and Sufia on the roof with nothing to do. They smoke spliff. (pg 5 – pg 9)
- Scene 8. Paul's increasing apathy. Sufia worries about his smoking. (pg 18 - pg 22)
- Scene 11. Paul is stoned and Calum dies whilst in his care. (pg 25 – pg 26)
- Scene 20. Leah takes responsibility for supplying the spliff to Paul. (pg 43)
- Scene 20. Paul, Leah and Sufia share a last spliff. (pg 46)

Relationships and Racism

- Scene 2. Sufia is surprised to see Paul on an Asian tower block. (pg 2-4)
- Scene 3. Paul describing how he had never thought of himself going out with an Asian girl. (pg 5)
- Scene 4. Sufia talking about her dad and his white girlfriend. (pg 8– pg 9)
- Scene 6. Paul is beaten up for going out with Sufia. (pg 13)
- Scene 7. Paul challenges Leah about her relationship with Tattoo Steve. (pg 14 – pg 16)
- Scene 10. Paul challenges Leah about Tattoo Steve's racist attitudes. (pg 23 – pg 24)
- Scene 19. Leah and Paul's mum chooses Racist Dave as her partner. (pg 42)
- Scene 20. Paul and Leah imagine seeing her dad in Ghana. (pg 44 – pg 45)

Environment and the Future

- Scene 1. Paul, Sufia and Leah look out over Stepney 2020. (pg 1-2)
- Scene 6. The river level is rising. The people are becoming divided. (pg 11 – pg 12)
- Scene 8. The effects of global warming. Power cuts. A lack of jobs. (pg 19 – pg 21)
- Scene 10. Racism increases as life becomes harder. (pg 23– pg 24)
- Scene 12. Paul describes the blackouts as power is rationed. (pg 26)
- Scene 15. Paul gets a job opportunity to travel to Alpha Centauri. (pg 31 – pg 33)
- Scene 18. Paul wants Sufia to go with him to outer space; she has work to do on earth. (pg 38 – pg 40)
- Scene 21. Paul, Leah and Sufia look down on the earth. (pg 46 – pg 47)

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4 Suggested Exercises to Support AO1, AO2, AO4

AO1 The Response Phase

"...explain how the use of these strategies enhanced their understanding and appreciation of the play text.."

Explore the incident of Paul getting beaten up using **forum theatre**. Use Paul's description of what happened to him on page 13 of the play to create a series of scenes.

- Scene 1 Paul and Sufia on the roof. Having a good time.
- Scene 2 Paul out looting with his mates. The racist comments begin.
- Scene 3 Paul getting beaten up at the gas works.

Ensure that the violence in the scene is controlled, perhaps working in slow motion, or with characters describing their actions as well as acting them.

Forum questions

What does Paul 'want' in this situation? He may have a range of 'wants' including; not getting beaten up, not losing his friends, not losing Sufia.

Can he do anything to get all his 'wants'? Try these things. If he can't achieve them all, which are the most important and what can he do to achieve them? Try these out.

Explore Scene 8 using **forum theatre**.

2 students prepare the scene from pg 19. *SUFIA I might get a job* to pg 20 *Paul grabs Sufia and takes back his weed*.

Forum questions

Sufia is worried about Paul's drug use. What do you think she 'wants' to happen? Is there anything else that she could say or do to achieve her 'wants'? Could anybody else help?

Create **still images** or short **role-plays** of the offstage characters in the play:

- Tattoo Steve and his gang
- Munna Ahmed and his mates
- Racist Dave
- Paul and Leah's mum
- Privileged students at Sufia's college
- Students on grants

Thought track a student playing Leah, Sufia or Paul as they observe these characters; this could be done as if they were on the roof looking down on them.

Ask students to imagine they are **narrating** some of the events in the play. Consider different ways that the same event could be reported,

- as if you were a reporter for BBC news,
- as if you were a reporter for Sky news,
- as if you were a reporter for The Sun newspaper,
- as if you were a reporter for The Voice newspaper.

Paul being beaten up (pg 13), The fight between Tattoo Steve and his gang and Munna Ahmed (pg 25), Calum falling from the roof (pg 26).

Reading *The Street Scene* by Bertolt Brecht will support this exercise.

(Brecht On Theatre. Translated by John Willett. Pub: Methuen.1986. pg 121 – pg 129)

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AO2 The Development Phase

"...demonstrate their understanding and interpretation of a scene or section of the play..."

Use Half Moon's follow up workshop as an assessed session for this phase.

Students prepare and present scenes from the themes and issues list (**action, plot and content**). They should annotate their scripts with the **conventions** and **symbols** that they are employing.

Use a selection of the following exercises to support this activity:

Characterisation (physical/vocal)

- Identify 3 or 4 typical physical actions of your character throughout the play. Choreograph a repetitive movement sequence that links these actions. Select and use **music** from the soundtrack CD to support. (Example: Paul - smoking spliff; looking across Stepney; revising for exam)
- Vocal exercise. In groups of four. Select three or four moments of the play when your character is talking to different people, use other students to represent those characters, deliver your phrases. Experiment with the differences. The number of characters who have dialogue with each other is limited, so you could also imagine your character talking to one of the offstage characters.

Example: Sufia

To Paul She's pretty your sister. What is she doing with him?

To Leah What did he give up Leah? A group of Paki bashing friends.

To Audience Today I found a winding staircase at the back of the canteen.

To Scarlet Hi, my name's Sufia, what do you think of this place then?

- Consider what your character 'wants' from the scene. Identify the obstacles they face. Identify the actions they take to achieve that 'want'.

Example: Leah in Scene 7.

Leah 'wants' Paul to take Calum so she can have time with Tattoo Steve.

Her obstacles include Paul's dislike of Steve and that Paul won't come off the roof.

Her actions include taking Calum to the roof and bribing Paul with drugs.

Reference to C. Stanislavski (units and objectives) and A. Boal (Will and counter will)

Rhythm/pace/tempo. Encourage the students to explore different energies when playing their scenes.

Ask the students to imagine three energy levels, give examples from the play

10 The gangs when they are in the middle of the fight

5 Leah working in her allotment

1 When Paul is completely stoned.

They should now run their prepared scene three times, once for each energy level. Now consider the appropriate levels for different moments and characters in the scene and run it again with the changing levels.

Exploring the theme of the environment and the future, ask the students to prepare sketches or storyboards of staging ideas. What **symbols** and **conventions** will they use to convey this theme?

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AO4 The Evaluative Phase

"...provide an evaluation of the work of others based...on a live performance..."

Some of the following exercises will aid the writing of a review of *Blowback*.

To fully appreciate the "significance of the social, cultural and/or historical influences on the play..." **cross-cut** moments from the play that represent its futuristic setting with improvised scenes or **still images** that represent contemporary urban life. What is different about the future the writer has imagined?

Ask students to create a series of images of the dramatic highlights of the play. Share and discuss the images.

Remind students of the opening description of the play. "*Blowback is set in Stepney in 2020. The play explores the boundaries between reality, memory and imagination.*" Can they demonstrate or describe how this was achieved through **symbol, convention and form?**

Give students the review of *Little Sweet Thing* and the accompanying notes.

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***Little Sweet Thing* by Roy Williams**

Review by Steve Orme. British Theatre Guide www.britishtheatreguide.info
Eclipse Theatre at Nottingham Playhouse and touring. 2005

A lone youngster mimes taking shots at a basketball hoop. He appears to miss. The more he misses, the more angry and frustrated he becomes. A teenager, unidentifiable because he wears a hood, which covers his face, offers the player a real basketball - a symbolic reference to his former life. He resists - but for how long? That's the start of Roy Williams' new play, a gritty, earthy look at the temptations facing young people today as they grow up in a world in which bullying, violence and gun crime are never far away.

Little Sweet Thing is the third play in the Eclipse initiative which aims to develop the profile of national and regional black theatre. But director Michael Buffong points out that Williams' latest offering is not a "black" play because it catalogues the problems faced by all adolescents.

Williams, whose productions have so far played only in London, has come up with a clever, incisive script and has accurately captured the dialogue and culture of today's kids on the streets.

Buffong has assembled an enthusiastic troupe who are keen to put over Williams' message that there are limits to what you should do to look good in your mates' eyes. Marcel McCalla throws himself totally into his role as Kev, just out of prison and determined not to return to his old ways, even if that means taking a menial job and suffering ridicule from his peers.

Equally as impressive is Seroca Davis as Tash, Kev's sister. She's the insolent, manipulative schoolgirl who comes over as tough and selfish because that's how she thinks she ought to behave. As she matures she begins to adopt a different attitude as she realises she needs friendship more than she'll admit.

The rest of the cast are just as ebullient although a couple of the actors didn't project as well as they might have done and some of their lines were lost.

On the whole, though, it's a terrific production with some exceptional moments, none better than a nightclub shooting which is acted at normal speed, then in reverse and finally in slow motion.

Ruari Murchison's set is simple yet extremely effective, with projections onto the basketball backboard astutely pointing up each new scene.

The only disconcerting part of the evening was the audience's reaction to what was happening on stage. It was good to see so many youngsters enjoying *Little Sweet Thing* but they tended to find humour where the actors and director were trying to emphasise the tension in a scene.

The ending is quite distressing and involves a brutal act of revenge. It was skilfully done and almost took your breath away. Yet many of the youngsters cheered at the outcome. Eclipse Theatre has made great strides in a short time. *Little Sweet Thing* will boost its reputation further. *Little Sweet Thing* scores because people of all ages can recognise the problems faced by today's adolescents whatever their colour.

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This review includes:

- Name of production company
- Title of the play
- Name of playwright
- Venue
- Reference to the themes. *"bullying, violence and gun crime"*
- Descriptions of action. *"a nightclub shooting which is acted at normal speed"*
- Acting notes, positives and criticisms. *"throws himself totally into his role"*
- Notes on the writing. *"clever, incisive script"*
- Notes on the set and costumes. *"because he wears a hood which covers his face"*
- A quote from the director
- The reviewer's opinions on the plays social and cultural significance
- An overall opinion on the plays effectiveness

When reviewing *Blowback* you could add:

- A drawing or sketch of the set and costume design
- Your thoughts on how sound/music were used to create atmosphere
- What you would want to change and why

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Blowback Teacher Resource Pack
Written by Adam Annand in conjunction with Half Moon staff

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Half Moon runs an extensive programme of participatory activities for young people. We work in partnership with schools, arts organisations and community groups throughout Tower Hamlets and across London.

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