

Physical theatre and ways to begin devising inspired by Frantic Assembly

AS/A2

Rhianna Elsdon

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Introduction

What is physical theatre? How can students be encouraged to work more physically, embracing different practitioner's approaches, as well as discovering their own physical theatrical language? How can existing or devised text be combined with highly physical theatre styles? These questions are addressed in this scheme which works best for KS5. While it is intended for drama students, students with dance skills will also benefit. Frantic Assembly's ideas and exercises are embedded throughout. This scheme could therefore be useful to students as an introduction to Frantic as inspirational theatre practitioners, or for devising their own work. The lessons could lead to work on an extended piece or remain as a series of workshops with smaller performance outcomes.

Learning objectives

By the end of this scheme all students will:

- ▶ Have developed their understanding of what physical theatre is
- ▶ Have developed their ability to work physically in drama
- ▶ Have developed their ability to devise their own original work for performance
- ▶ Have developed their understanding of theatre practitioners Frantic Assembly
- ▶ Have developed their ability to use text alongside physical theatre.

By the end of this scheme some students will:

- ▶ Have developed their characterisation in performance skills
- ▶ Have developed their ability to work using physical theatre and non-naturalistic drama techniques incorporating complex lifts.

Lesson 1: What is physical theatre and who are Frantic Assembly?

Learning objectives

By the end of the lesson students will have learned:

- ▶ How to define 'physical theatre' and all that it might encompass
- ▶ Who Frantic Assembly are and to begin understanding their relevance to theatre today
- ▶ How to begin to work physically and to extend their physical limits
- ▶ How to work collaboratively with others in discussion and practical work.

Warm-up part 1 (10 mins)

An extended warm-up (broken into sections but covering most of the lesson) with a series of activities to build trust, but also to begin the student's process of exploring what they thought were their limits, and going beyond them. See PowerPoint slide 2 on board with no explanation.

In this part of the warm-up, start with some stretching of your own choice for 10 minutes. These should be simple and 'non-theatrical' at this stage.

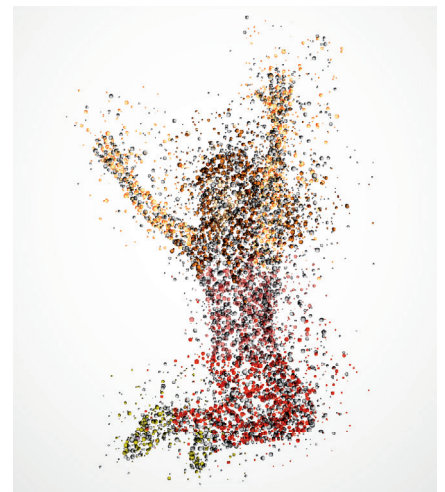
Discussion (2 mins)

During the warm-up, while students are stretching, without letting them 'rest', start them thinking by asking/discussing: What is Physical Theatre?

Warm-up 1 extension

Jerzy Grotowski yoga stretching techniques could be used at the start of this and indeed any of the lessons.

Rhianna Elsdon has been a qualified teacher of drama for 13 years since graduating from Cambridge in 2002. She has worked in three state schools and extensively for Edexcel. She is currently a Head of Faculty and a Specialist Leader in Education. She is also a published playwright.



Resources

- ▶ *The Frantic Assembly Book of Devising Theatre* – all of the quotes used in this scheme are taken from the book and some of the exercises are adapted from it
- ▶ Augusto Boal's *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*
- ▶ PowerPoint presentation (see Resources included at the end of this scheme)
- ▶ Internet access
- ▶ Crash mats
- ▶ Preferably use a floor that would be suitable for dancers, i.e. clean, sprung
- ▶ *Two* by Jim Cartwright.

'... warm-ups should be tailored to what you are about to do' – Frantic Assembly

'This is not about dated and cringe-worthy trust games' – Frantic Assembly

Videos of Grotowski are available on YouTube that could either be followed, or the teacher could demonstrate adapted moves, depending on level of expertise and confidence.

Warm-up part 2 (10–15 mins)**Columbian Hypnosis**

This is an Augusto Boal 'game'. In pairs, A puts the palm of their hand approximately 10cm from B's face. As if hypnotised, B must go wherever the palm goes, aiming to keep the distance between it and their face the same. This is not a 'game' in which one is aiming to 'win'; the leader must challenge their partner with different levels and pace, but not to the point that B cannot reasonably keep up.

Push Hands

This is a Frantic Assembly exercise. In the same pairs, B puts their hand out, palm down. A, their partner, puts their hand on top, to which the one underneath – B – pushes up slightly so there is dynamic contact (they must not 'cheat' and hold hands). A is the leader and takes the person around the room exploring its space and levels, and stretching B again without trying to 'win' by making something impossible for them. Pace and levels should be changed by the leader and both must concentrate on the signals the other is sending just through touch.

After a while, get the person being led – B – to close their eyes. After a couple of minutes, stop the activity and students briefly reflect on how it felt.

Visual stimuli

Again, without letting the students sit down to rest, show a clip from the Frantic Assembly website from one of their shows.

PowerPoint, slide 3 – Frantic Assembly's definition of physical theatre. Have the slide projected as students continue with their warm-up, making it clear to them that many of the warm-ups they are doing are what the company do before creating the amazing work they have just seen.

Warm-up part 3 (10 mins)**Marcia Takedown**

This is a Frantic Assembly exercise. Again in pairs, A closes their eyes. B places a flat hand gently on the back of their partner's neck and leads them around the space using the slightest pressure possible to indicate direction and speed.

Marcia Takedown extension

All walking around in the space with eyes open, anyone can take control of a random partner for a short time as they walk around the room before then safely letting them go free again. Once this is working well, insist that the person being controlled closes their eyes as soon as they feel the hand placed on their back.

When releasing them, to ensure the person knows when to open their eyes, the person 'controlling' could tap with their palm three times in quick succession on the back of their partner which is the sign for eyes to open and walking alone to commence.

Plenary

Reflect on what has been learnt in this lesson while stretching out and warming down. What do they now understand about Frantic Assembly? What are they feeling in regards to trust and confidence and their physicality having completed the building-block warm-up activities?

Lesson 2: Developing performance work in the style of Frantic Assembly

Learning objectives

By the end of the lesson students will have learnt:

- ▶ How to use Frantic Assembly's ideas to develop performance outcomes
- ▶ How to begin to work physically and to extend what they thought their physical limits were
- ▶ How to use physical theatre effectively to communicate meaning and ideas
- ▶ How to work collaboratively with others in discussion and practical work.

Warm-up (20 mins)

Repeat from Lesson 1 the yoga-Grotowski stretching.

Then repeat the Push Hands and Marcia Takedown activities, which this time should require far less explanation to set up and run.

Encourage them to relax and not brace the arm and body.

Frantic's trailers are very well edited, visually and aurally engaging; they have one for each of their main shows in the past few years and each one lasts approximately 2 minutes so they work well to punctuate activity without letting students drift in their intensity.

If the students have seen/studied Frantic Assembly's work, this could be changed to a 'What do we know about Frantic Assembly?' recap.

'... they should think of this moment as liberating, rather than frightening' – Frantic Assembly

Homework: Independent research on Frantic Assembly

Direct students to watch particular clips of interest and to explore the company's website to discover who they are and what they do. Encourage students to find reviews beyond the website on Frantic Assembly shows that indicate what others think of their work.

This could be developed into students having to deliver a formal presentation at some stage in the scheme. This research could also be of use in coursework notes on practitioner influences or devising techniques.

Quad

This is a Frantic Assembly favourite that will build up the stamina and sweat in the room! The group is placed into a grid formation, all facing the same way. The front row bounce on the spot eight times in unison, shoulders and hands relaxed.

On the eighth count the front row turn to face the row behind and on the next 'one' the second row now bounce in unison eight times, and then turn 180 degrees to face the row behind them. When the back row complete their eight jumps, they rotate 180 degrees to face no one and then keep going starting on one and turning 180 on six this time. They will then be facing a row again, who now go one to six and turn, etc. This keeps going back and forth up and down the grid turning on 8, then 6, then 4, then 2 and finally 1. Have PowerPoint slide 4 up while this activity is taking place and call students' attention to it if you notice they are tensing up.

Quad extension

Different moves can be added to numbers once the group appears comfortable with the activity. It could be they raise their arm on every 3 they call out, or a clap on every 5 that is called out. They must add in these whilst still keeping with the same original structure of bouncing and turning.

Phone Numbers

This Frantic Assembly activity was designed to help students realise that they are more capable of learning complex choreography than they realise. Each student stands facing a section of a wall around the room. They imagine a giant numerical keypad in front of them. Using only their right hand, which is out at all times, they point out their telephone number as if pressing the numbers on a huge phone.

Phone Numbers extension

This is repeated but just with the eyes and head looking and moving towards the numbers. Then try just swaying to the numbers and back to a neutral centred position in between.

Main activity

In groups of three, this three-part sequence is developed for performance to the rest of the class. All students use the same phone number and start with swaying in unison as if their bodies are moving towards the numbers on the keypad on a wall in front of them, only now there will eventually be just an audience in front of them. Then they go into their heads doing it and finally with the arms/hands tapping the numbers. Music is introduced and students choreograph the movements to match the rhythm and create the three-segmented movement sequence developing their ability to move in unison as well as to the beat.

Draw students' attention to PowerPoint slide 5 as they work.

This is then shown, and preferably the performance is videoed so they can watch their work.

Plenary

Having performed, and watched their work, students reflect on their learning, their engagement and the challenges they are facing and overcoming.

Lessons 3–4: Extending pieces developed in the style of Frantic Assembly

Learning objectives

By the end of the lesson students will have learnt:

- ▶ How to use Frantic Assembly's ideas to develop performance outcomes
- ▶ How to work physically and to extend what they thought their physical limits were
- ▶ How to use physical theatre effectively to communicate meaning and ideas
- ▶ How to work collaboratively with others in discussion and practical work.

Warm-up (20 mins)

Repeat from Lesson 1 the yoga-Grotowski stretching.

Then repeat the Quad exercises which this time should require far less explanation to set up and run.

Clear the Space

This is Frantic's adaptation of a drama favourite. Students walk the space, at a pace of 105 per cent imagining that pedestrian speed is 100 per cent. The following are then thrown in at any point for the students to respond to:

This can be done to a beat, music, or they can call out the count, which is often the best way to begin getting to grips with the activity.

Frantic frequently record their rehearsals so they can review the work to see what has come out of it; being inside the rehearsal and then stepping outside to watch reveals brand new things to reflect upon or use.

'Clear the space': the whole group must move to the outside edges of the room and place both hands on the wall.

'Centre': all students go to the centre standing as close as possible.

'Fold': students take themselves to the floor in a fluid, spiral motion into a foetal position. To get up, 'Unfold' is called out.

'Look': everyone stands still and looks into the eyes of any other person in the room; it does not matter if the gaze is not met.

'Favourite': here, students go to a favourite object or place in the room, stand and point at the object/part.

'Person': here students grab the nearest person and form a hug.

In between, students can also be given the instruction to just walk, in which case they return to moving around the room at 105 per cent.

Clear the Space extension

Once students have grown comfortable responding to ever-increasing instructions called at ever-increasing pace, they could then extend the activity.

Instead of standing and going into the next called-out instruction, if students are on the floor, they remain so to make their way into whatever is called next. Combinations can be called out, such as 'person' and favourite' in which interesting tussles will ensue.

Main activity: Fluff

This is a very simple starting exercise which then forms a visually beautiful outcome that starts the students understanding of what will be involved in Frantic's infamous chair duet which they will go on to see and develop afterwards.

To begin, in pairs, the students sit facing each other, knees touching. Each one does five moves as if removing a piece of fluff from the other, or adjusting the glasses or a strand of fallen hair from the partner. At this stage, keep it simple with one person doing their five moves, then the other doing theirs, and there is no response at any point to the moves.

The sequence can then be played with, and they can take it in turns to do the actions. After this they could decide to do a more complex sequence in terms of the order. This work is then shown in its development and students can discuss what accidental sub-texts and stories are coming through.

Fluff extension

Students could do their moves at the same time as their partners and see what comes of this:

- ▶ What if one blocks the movement of the other?
- ▶ What happens if they angle away from an approaching hand in some way?
- ▶ What if they look at the hand coming in and watch the action compared to just staring at each other?
- ▶ What if the impact of the touch creates a recoil or an exaggerated response?
- ▶ What if the person, as if magnetised, is pulled into the approaching hand to make contact with the other?

Out of the experiments, students then develop a more formed and structured piece. They find music for themselves which the piece is played to as a soundtrack.

Plenary

These pieces are eventually performed, filmed and evaluated.

Lessons 5 and 6: Frantic Assembly's chair duets

Learning objectives

By the end of the lesson students will have learnt:

- ▶ How to use Frantic Assembly's ideas to develop performance outcomes
- ▶ How to work physically and to extend what they thought their physical limits were
- ▶ How to use physical theatre effectively to communicate meaning and ideas
- ▶ How to work collaboratively with others in discussion and practical work.

This lesson starts by watching the visual stimulus – PowerPoint slide 6. Show https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UJ_9Eaog2yw as an example of a Chair Duet sequence and where the students in this lesson are heading.

Students give their reaction – what do they notice seems to be the make up of the Chair Duets? Display PowerPoint slide 7 on the board as they work.

The music could be used for its rhythm, or for the mood it creates.

There are many examples on the internet and YouTube of Frantic Assembly inspired Chair Duets. Pick your favourite!

Warm-up (20 mins)

Repeat from Lesson 1 the yoga-Grotowski stretching.

Then repeat the Quad exercises and Clear the Space.

The Third Relay

Put the students into equal teams of roughly 4. At one end set a chair for each team to circle. At the opposite side the team line up. First runner sets off, runs up to and circles the object. They run back and then with their left hand between their legs they take hold of the right hand of the next person in their team. Holding on, they run again to the object and circle and return with student 2 linking to student 3 again with their hand between their legs. This forms an increasingly absurd chain, breaking the ice and adding in lots of fun to the physical exertion.

The winning team are the first back to the starting line as a chain.

Main activity: Chair Duet development

Students work in pairs and start by sitting side by side. They face the front and remain seated for now. A puts their hand on the other. It should be a firm and deliberate placement anywhere.

They then come up with three moves. These could move their partner in some way, or they could be hands on themselves, or placing their partner's hands somewhere else on their own body. They then remain in their final position and then B takes over developing three moves.

They practise this and get to the stage where they don't have to look at each other and are able to do it while looking straight ahead. In the next lesson, they refine through further rehearsals, finding music, and this then can be shared and evaluated.

Plenary

Discuss the final pieces – what stories and characters naturally emerged?

Lessons 7, 8 and 9: Adding text to Frantic Assembly

Learning objectives

By the end of the lesson students will have learnt:

- ▶ How to use Frantic Assembly's ideas to develop performance outcomes
- ▶ How to work physically and to extend what they thought their physical limits were
- ▶ How to use physical theatre effectively to communicate meaning and ideas
- ▶ How to use Frantic Assembly's physical ideas alongside existing or devised text
- ▶ How to work collaboratively with others in discussion and practical work.

Warm-up (20 mins)

Repeat from Lesson 1 the yoga-Grotowski stretching. Then Quad followed by a run of their previously developed Chair Duet as a reminder of what they have learnt and developed and a warm-up to the rest of the work.

Main activity

Students are given a dialogue section from a play, e.g. Roy and Lesley from *Two* by Jim Cartwright, and develop work using this.

- ▶ Stage 1 – they produce a Chair Duet inspired by the text, in the case of Roy and Lesley there is violence and tension and control from Roy, which gives lots of movement ideas to explore.
- ▶ Stage 2 – students perform the dialogue very naturalistically but then finish with a Chair Duet created in Stage 1
- ▶ Stage 3 – students perform the scene naturalistically in terms of delivering the dialogue, but add in movements and Chair Duet moments whilst still speaking the text.

All stages are recorded, watched and evaluated.

Plenary

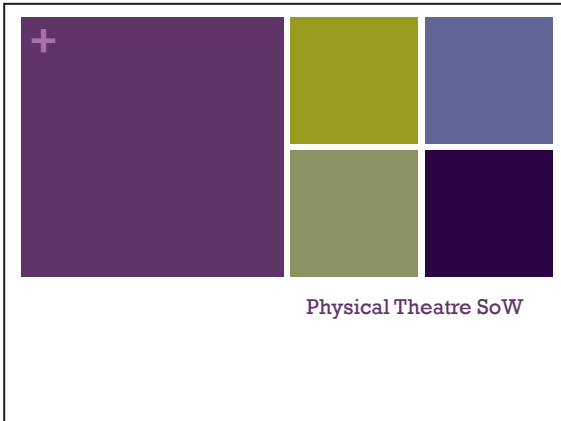
To bring the whole scheme to a close, students could develop an extended devised piece using Frantic's style as they now understand it. They could complete a reflective presentation on the company or the work could culminate in a teacher-led discussion of what has been explored, enjoyed and how it might be of use in the future.

Students should not choose inappropriate places for the placement of their hands that will make audience or performers uncomfortable.

In Frantic Assembly's own devising book, various extensions and ways to open this up to a whole group are outlined. The class can also be inspired by watching further examples, such as the one already shown which brings new people in and out of the pairs.

RESOURCES

Link to download the Physical Theatre SoW PowerPoint document: [http://www.rhinegold.co.uk/downloads/catalogue_supporting_materials/Physical Theatre SoW \(00000002\).pptx](http://www.rhinegold.co.uk/downloads/catalogue_supporting_materials/Physical%20Theatre%20SoW%20(00000002).pptx)



+ “We have always found that people can do more than they think they can. They can be pushed to surprise themselves. But you cannot just expect someone to fly without giving them flying lessons. Confidence and trust go hand in hand and should be worked at.” Frantic Assembly

+ **What is Physical Theatre?”**

“Physical Theatre’ is actually quite a frustrating phrase as it barely manages to describe...the wide range of styles and influences that are clustered under its banner.

It appears ‘physical theatre’ is used as an umbrella term for aspects of theatre including dance theatre, mime, clowning and traditional pictorial or visual theatre. Within this is an enormous range of ‘physicality’ from the limb-threateningly expressive to the delicate and demonstrative.” Frantic Assembly

+ **As you bounce, and count
– don’t tense up!**

+ **Do not overly emote during movement. Aim for something more naturalistic. You are heightening every day movement rather than acting. This does not mean you lose yourself behind a physical theatre neutral mask – let your personalities come through.**

+ **Chair Duets – watch, be inspired...**

■ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UJ_9Eaog2yw

+ **Chair Duets – Frantic Assembly**

“A very physical scene of touches, embraces, flirtations, rejections, all played [eventually] at a quite mesmerizing speed.

Keep it simple and build it in bite-size chunks. And don’t try and create a story – let it develop.”

Frantic Assembly