

Session Write Up: 10<sup>th</sup> October 2002.

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### **English Drama Session: 10<sup>th</sup> October 2002**

The play, 'Chocolate', opened to the 'Pink Panther' music and a mime of Inspector Clouseau. It then moved into the 1950's American private eye genre with a down at heel American private eye, Ridley, and the mandatory mysterious rich blonde client, Angel.

The action moves to the Ivory Coast. A 'travelogue' style voice-over introduces the political geography of the Ivory Coast, during the flight. The travelogue is repeatedly used during scene breaks and becomes increasingly personal in information, culminating in speeches from individual inhabitants of the area.

The play utilises short scenes to dramatise the storyline:

- the introduction of a black girl, Miriam, talking to her diary about her boyfriend, her recent 14<sup>th</sup> birthday and her locket;
- her abduction by a voodoo like figure, wearing a mask;
- her mother's desperate call for help to Ridley, now in the Ivory coast;
- Angel, and her husband discuss missing girls but with no real interest;
- Angel and her husband give an investment raising presentation for their new chocolate bar;
- Miriam mimes working, attempts to run away, is caught and beaten;
- Ridley finds a dead body in a sack and sees an imprisoned Miriam who asks for his help;
- Ridley informs Angel, whose husband tells his henchmen to dispose of Ridley;
- Ridley, warned by Angel, runs back to England;
- Angel informs him by letter of Miriam's suicide.

During this, the travelogue voice-overs tell of the use of slave labour to produce 90% of the Ivory Coast cocoa beans eaten by UK citizens.

The play has two actors and one stagehand. Props and costumes are kept to a minimum: a table, a sack and a screen with two posters and a slide board on it. Music is used to provide scene information e.g. jungle sounds and market sounds. The play moves from '50's detective genre to serious discussion of the modern use of slavery. Miriam is portrayed as a young girl with the same interests as English teenagers to engage a youthful audience. African accents were low-key. Ridley's accent was intermittent.

The pupil audience remained engaged throughout, and asked pertinent and interested questions at the end.

During the question and answer session with the actors, the following key points were made:

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- The aim of the play is to show that consumers have all the power and to encourage us to eat fair-trade chocolate only. The structure of the play aimed to introduce gradually the seriousness of the subject, once the audience had been engaged.
- Having seen the play one pupil did petition Nestle and Cadbury but received only marketing blather back. One company did actually say 'We don't own the plantations.' (a line included in the play).
- The actors are local to Gloucester and Wiltshire and are currently self-funded: hence the need to include cross-curricular information (e.g. geography) to appeal to a broad range of teaching situations.
- The personal speeches in the voice-overs are true accounts. The line, 'Who eats chocolate eats my flesh,' is a quotation.
- The voodoo figure represented a company hit man who would use a local context to hide the real purpose of his actions.
- The play was formed iteratively, using a lot of improvisation and informal readings to friends. The only deadline set was for the showcase performance. The director had been very useful: he lengthened the opening scene, for example, which the actors would not have done. They like to have workshops with pupils afterwards: hot-seating characters and having the pupils do improvisation.

In the trainee discussion which concluded the session, the following points triggered conflicting views and debate:

- Some felt that the use of the 'Pink Panther' theme was inappropriate and created the wrong atmosphere; others thought it was a good way of drawing pupils in.
- It was noted that Ridley's accent was poor and, at times, the acting was hit and miss. These and other flaws were useful in giving pupils an opportunity to critique a play - it was felt that a more sophisticated production would be less useful as a drama teaching aid.
- Some felt that the play gave the impression that the problem was an entirely American one: others did not believe that all the characters were portrayed as Americans and that it was therefore portrayed as a global problem.
- The suicide mime whilst Ridley read Angel's letter telling him Miriam's fate was felt to be very powerful, with Miriam's character having been successfully identified with.
- The retreat of Ridley back to England was also felt to have been very powerful in creating and identifying a sense of powerlessness in us all.
- It was felt that, having had pupils see the play, it was very important that follow up activities were undertaken, such as: the pupils writing to their MP or chocolate manufacturers; role-playing; discussion; further research; and writing and performing pupils' own plays.