

# FACTFILE:

## GCSE

### DRAMA

#### Component 3



## Knowledge and Understanding of Drama, Exploration of the Set Text

### Sparkleshark

by Philip Ridley

#### Social

- His work depicts both the sense of community that still exists in socially deprived areas as well as the external threats to that community;
- The play features children who are hardened to some extent to poverty, hardship and examines their plight and struggles as a result of deprivation;
- Tower blocks sprung up in the 1960's as a response to the inner city housing problems;
- Tower block living was not a good solution to Britain's housing problems. Too many people living within a small footprint meant an increase in crime, higher levels of mental health issues and delinquency;
- The play was written in the mid-late nineties; this was a time of increasing racial tensions resulting in street violence, with the British National Party, in 1993, securing their first seat in a local Election;
- The 90's was a hedonistic time, particularly prevalent in the Capital and characterised by increasing drug misuse, alcoholism, crime and anti-social behaviour;
- The play is set in the East-end, which is one of the poorest parts of London; both the grey skies and grey tower-blocks are used to help generate a dismal setting.

#### Cultural

- The play is heavily influenced by popular music culture of the 90's, music that often contained hidden moral messages. In this instance, the playwright was influenced by the band, *Pulp*;
- The popular image of youth culture in the 90's revolved around the 'urban species' of youth hanging around street corners, drinking, smoking and truanting. Inner-city areas became an urban jungle and there was massive overcrowding leading to anti-social behaviour, particularly amongst teenagers;
- Many schools failed to cope with the changing cultural shifts within society in terms of the multitude of languages spoken and changing landscape of cultural identities. In addition, the various sub-cultures and needs of low socio-economic groups brought with it fresh challenges. This is seen in *Sparkleshark* through the endemic issue of bullying and the class system represented;
- The writer has indicated a lack of 'youth culture,' arguing that we live in a 'cultural desert' and that it is the 'storytellers' who can help us to understand the terrors of life;
- There are no adults in the play and so their imaginations are independent of adult intervention.

## Historical

- This is a piece of theatre designed specifically with young audiences in mind. It was written by Phillip Ridley and was specially commissioned for The Royal National Theatre in 1997 and was performed by the Youth Lyric Theatre Group from Belfast;
- *Sparkleshark* won first prize at the annual BT National Connections competition;
- *Sparkleshark* was professionally produced at the Royal National Theatre in 1999 before touring in 2001;
- Ridley was born in 1964 in the East End of London;
- He writes about his own life experiences having grown up in the Bethnal Green area of inner-city East London. The rooftop featured in the play is in fact the rooftop of the family flat in which he lives;
- The central character Jake is a representation of the writer, Phillip Ridley, who immersed himself in stories and fantasy to escape bullying. Ridley creates a sense of malice and menace that can be found on every street corner or in most playgrounds. The violence and sheer psychological viciousness can be transposed to any contemporary setting.

## Theatrical Conventions

- *Sparkleshark* contains a **play within a play**. This is an old dramatic device that is often seen in Shakespearean plays;
- Other techniques used are **third-person narrative**, in particular, Russell speaks in third person;
- The play also contains **dual speech** (two characters Polly and Jake) speak at the same time to symbolise their budding relationship;
- Constant shift between fairytale storytelling and fantasy to the idioms of youth culture;
- There are various **symbolic references** throughout, particularly in the fairytale when Jake and Russell battle the dragon together;
- The **stage directions** are descriptive and explicit. For example, the audience are made aware that Jake is 'clutching' a satchel rather than holding a satchel.

## Form and Style

- The play is written in One Act and there is a continuous flow of action throughout;
- It was written for Theatre for Young People with a youth audience as the target audience. It contains six males and three females, who are around 14/15 years old;
- It is set on the roof-top of a tower block in East London, but it can be set in any British inner city landscape;
- There is juxtaposition in the work with menace contrasting with the enchanting world of fantasy and everyday realism is set against the creative world of imagination;
- There is a detailed set description at the beginning of the play, which would work well on a Proscenium Arch Stage or Apron Stage. The style of the play is naturalistic, with only one location being used throughout;
- The area is abandoned and disused; the set and stage props should represent this.

## Genre

- A contemporary play written for Theatre for Young Audiences;
- The play deal with finding one's identity, hierarchy in teenage relationships, feelings of isolation and issues with communication;
- There is a moral contained within the play about the underdog and how one can overcome issues of bullying and taunting;
- Art and expression is a bridge accessible for all and an escape from the drudgery of modern life and all of its challenges. The play contained within the play helps to provide an avenue for this escape, a means of communication for all and a way for the characters to express themselves regardless of circumstance.  
*"In today's cultural desert the storyteller is someone who can help people to understand that terrors of life."* Phillip Ridley;
- The play is naturalistic in style, but contains elements of comedy and episodes of fantasy storytelling.

## Language

- The language is contemporary in the realistic interactions between characters. It is at times brusque and reflective of modern teenage speak;
- It is often dialectical, with colloquialisms used throughout;
- The tone is reflective of a disillusioned group of youths from a low socio-economic group. Language in the fantasy and story-telling sequences is juxtaposed against the realistic dialogic interactions between the group of teenagers and it is more exaggerated as well as being more poetic at times;
- Words and stories provide sanctuary and escape for the protagonist Jake. He is immersed in words and the first few lines demonstrate the importance of words to Jake as he tries to settle upon the correct word for his story. Jake finds comfort in words;
- Everyone's words and their delivery reflects the character type and their rank within the group hierarchy;
- However, Russell's choice of words to describe himself show how he uses words as a means to cover his insecurities and to an extent, like Jake, protect himself. He uses hyperbole and exaggeration;
- There is a clearly defined rhythm in the street-speak language.

## Structure

- The play is set over one day in the life of Jake, the central protagonist. It begins 'about 4.30p.m.' in 'mid-September' on a roof of an East London tower block;
- *Sparkleshark* is a one act play. It contains six males and three females. All of the characters are between 14–16 years old;
- The play opens with Jake on the roof of a tower block writing stories. He is in his own private world, when he is interrupted by Polly, who realises after a discussion with Jake that there is more to him than she realized;
- As the play progresses, more characters are introduced. This includes various social clichés; The cool girl finds her friend talking to 'The Geek' and then 'The Bullies' enter;
- The play moves from reality to fantasy and uncovers common ground, symbolising the various stages of a typical teenagers life: fantasy, mystery, danger and love;
- The play focuses on the trendy, cool stereotype, but aims to show the power of escape through fantasy and storytelling as well as the communal effect this can have; leaving us with the message that we have to help ourselves and sometimes be brave in doing so.

