

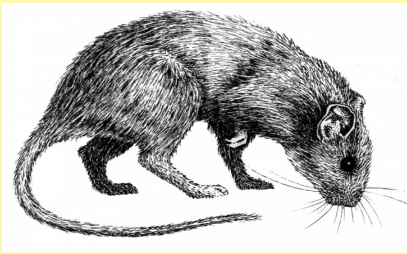
RATS DEMAND APOLOGY

A free downloadable resource to use with your drama students. We hope you enjoy it. If so, please do browse our other resources and suggestions.

Just before you have fun, we just need to go through the serious stuff- we know that you won't, but some naughty people like to publish/store our work on the internet without our permission. This does infringe copyright and cause us a few legal issues. We therefore respectfully ask that you use this work as it has been intended, for your own students and you do not store/share it on the internet.

Thank you! Now enjoy!

RATS DEMAND APOLOGY



Background

On February 24th 2015 new research was published which claimed that rats may have been unfairly blamed for the European outbreaks of the bubonic plague. The research claims that the Black Death was in fact brought to Europe by Asian gerbils. We thought that this news story would provide a great, amusing stimuli for some interesting devising or improvisation work.

Teaching Suggestions:

Issue the students with the fictional newspaper headline page overleaf. Do not explain anything about it, just ask them to read the breaking story.

Split the class into small groups and explain that they must create an improvisation or devised piece of drama which is called, 'Say Sorry to the Rats.'

The suggestions on this page could be used to try to encourage the students to incorporate a variety of different drama strategies into their rehearsals and their performances.

When devising or improvising, there are a number of different rehearsal strategies to explore with students. Encourage students to use some of these devices within their own performances:

Cross-Cutting/Split Screen:

One half of the group present an improvisation of a group of rats, demanding to get an apology. The other half could be the gerbils who have just discovered they are the cause of the disease. One could be frozen whilst the other scene comes to life.

Flash backs/Flash forwards:

Improvise a scene set at the time of the bubonic plague in 1665, London at the time when the people thought they were infected by the bite of an infected rat flea. Show the rat's reactions to this. Then flash forward to 2015, when scientists have discovered the rats are no longer the source of the infection.

Forum Theatre:

Stage an amusing example of the principles of Boal's Forum Theatre. Explain that the rats are the oppressed group. Improvise a scene which suggests that the rats are to blame for the disease; resulting in a negative reputation being built of rats. Then replay the scene and encourage the audience to interrupt the action with suggestions of how they could change the scene to suggest that perhaps it was not the rats' fault and enable a different outcome.

Use the handout on Page 3 to help your students understand this form of theatre in more detail.

Tableau/Still Image:

Ask groups to create a still image which summarises the perception people had of rats at the time of the Plague. Then create another image to show the change in perception, once it has been discovered that rats were not responsible. Or, create a still image of the idiom 'I smell a rat' and think about who and when this idiom would be used-does it refer to a cat? Or, do humans say it to convey the idea that something isn't right?

Soundscape:

Create a soundscape of different reactions to rats. The children could use their own voices to form an orchestra. They could create a sound which shows how people reacted to the rats during the Plague. Then create a different soundscape to show people's reactions now, once the research has been published.

Hot Seating:

Try an amusing exercise: let the students interview 'famous' rats! Suggestions could include: Roland Rat, the Boomtown Rats, Rizzo the Rat from the Muppets, Ratty from The Wind in the Willows, Remy the rat from the film Ratatouille, soldiers from the army squadron known as desert rats, the rat-catcher in the Pied Piper of Hamelin. Or, for an interesting alternative, interview some

mice or cats and try to gain their perspectives towards the larger rodents, for example Mickey Mouse.

Link to Berkoff:

Discuss with students the physical acting style needed when performing the role of the rats. Link this to Berkoff's beetle character (Gregor) in *Metamorphosis*. Concentrate upon how to use movement to portray the rodents. Consider Berkoff's quote, when describing his physical interpretation of the role of Gregor:

"I extended the idea of the bug so that he had six parts: these were his front legs [indicating his crossed forearms], and that the idea would be that the bug would be absolutely immobile, frozen. And that he would only move the way bugs do: suddenly. And I had the knees become the second section and the toes become the sixth leg. (I didn't have the antennae but you can imagine that.) So we tried to create this by moving very, very slowly."

Perhaps encourage students to study the small physical details of rats' movements and consider how they could reflect these in a performance; considering how their body parts can form different parts of the rat-for example could their noses become the whiskers etc.

Link to other plays:

Sam Holcroft's play, *The Wardrobe* could inspire some interesting drama work. This play is based around the idea of characters stepping into a wardrobe, which transports them back to a given moment in history. Perhaps students could apply this idea to the role of the rats at different points in history, such as in 1665, the Plague in London.

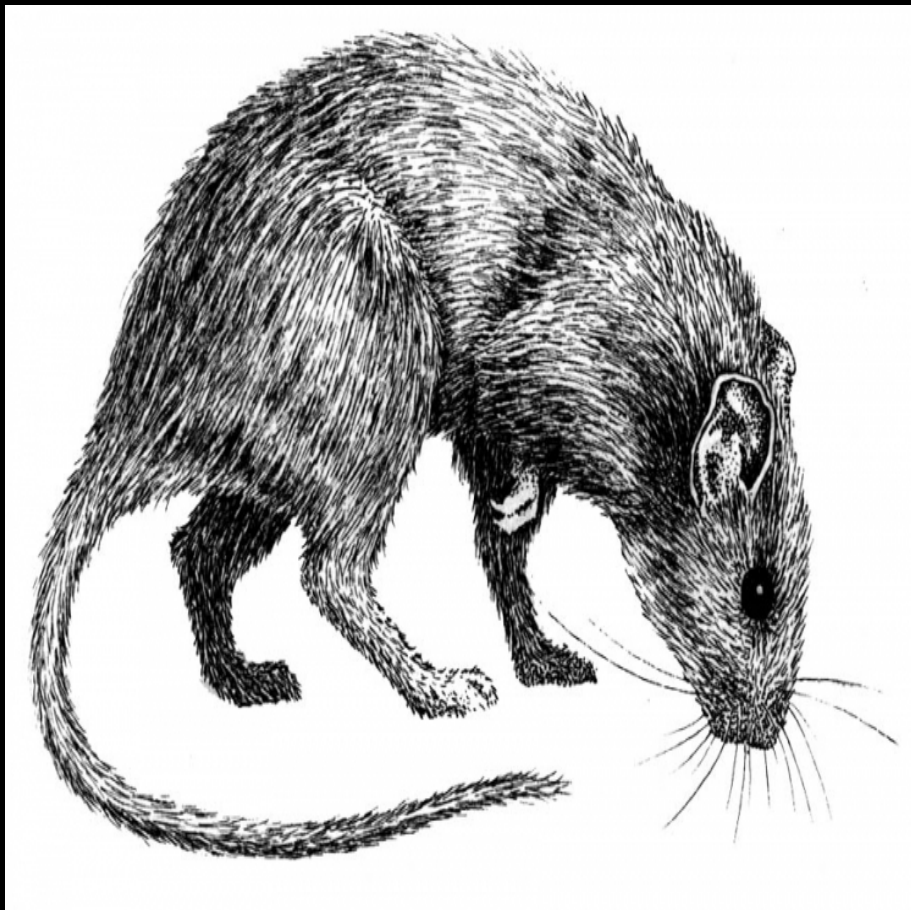
Or, the play *I Was A Rat!* (adapted from the Phillip Pullman novel) is a great source of inspiration. This focuses upon a boy who claims he used to be a rat. There are some great free clips available on the internet of the production by Birmingham Repertory Theatre.

Mask work:

To encourage students to explore the physicality demanded of performing an animalistic role, it might be useful for them to look at the work of Jacques Copeau, in particular the idea of using masks in rehearsal to free actors from their facially expressive habits. Students could be asked to wear a neutral mask, or something which covers their face, forcing them to express emotion and meaning through their body. This will help students to see that they should not always rely upon facial expressions, but must use other forms of communication in performance. This could lead into interesting work on the use of different masks in performance, such as masks used in Commedia dell'arte, or the masks used by Jacques Lecoq.



RATS DEMAND APOLOGY



Rats across the world are today demanding an apology following research which suggests that black rats were not the ones to blame for spreading the plague across Europe.

Scientists have today issued research which shows that the cause of the Black Death, centuries ago, could instead be traced back to gerbils from Asia.

The Black Death, which killed millions of people, was one of deadliest diseases in human history. It was believed that black rats were responsible for allowing the plague to establish in Europe, with people becoming infected when fleas jumped from the infected rodents to humans.

However, today scientists believe that another plague-carrying rodent was probably responsible for the outbreak: the giant gerbil. It is believed that these gerbils can be traced back to Asia- when trade between East and West was at its peak.

Whilst the plague died out in Europe in the nineteenth century, rats have continued to be blamed for their role in the spread of this deadly disease.

The European rodent population have welcomed this news and rats are now demanding an apology be made for the years of blame that they have had to endure.



Page 4:
we speak to the famous Roland Rat to hear his opinion of the news.

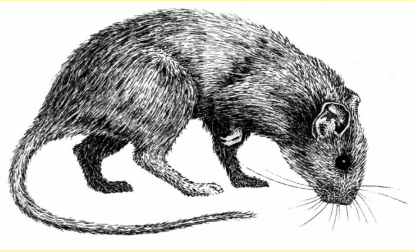


Page 12:
Ratty of the Wind in the Willows shares his views about what this means for rats.



Page 22:
Rizzo the Rat: "Finally, we get the recognition we deserve."

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Experiment With Forum Theatre

Alternative suggestions for the spect-actors to consider when watching the drama:

Rules:

1. In your group, create a short improvisation about how the central characters (the rats) experience oppression because of how people treat them following the belief that they spread the plague. There should be no happy resolution to this piece and the rats should be defeated-perhaps they could be exiled, or cast aside in the volumes of history to always be remembered as the cause of millions of deaths. Perform this play to a small audience.

2. Perform the play again to your audience. However, this time, your audience (spect-actors) are allowed to stop the action at any time. They can step on to the stage and swap roles with the actors. However, when they step into the drama, they must try to change the direction of the drama so that the situation improves for the characters experiencing oppression. (The rats). You may also introduce new characters into the drama such as scientists, or perhaps even bring in the gerbils.

- Were people travelling around the world at the time? Could this not have meant that they were bringing infection from other areas, such as Asia? Could a new character enter the scene, who is perhaps a merchant and regularly travels from London to Asia, perhaps importing silk?
- Does the increase in plague outbreaks not coincide with people travelling from the East (Asia) to Europe? Therefore, does this not show the rats had nothing to do with it? Could a character enter the scene who is perhaps in charge of export and import in Britain?
- What about thinking about the fleas who are riding on these rodents, rather than just the rodents? Are the fleas not also responsible? Could you introduce a character who is perhaps a vet and knows about this?
- Instead of blame, could we not find a way to help the species responsible for spreading the disease?

What's the point of Forum Theatre?

Forum Theatre was devised by the Brazilian dramatist Boal who wanted to use drama to help show people how to change and improve their own lives. He would use plays about issues or problems and show audiences how their intervention can help to improve situations. Whilst Boal would probably have not created a drama about rats, this exercise shows Boal's intentions that drama can be used to teach people about different outcomes and scenarios.