HISTORY OF THE NATIONAL THEATRE
Upper Key Stage 2

Developed by Karen Parker and Jo Carey
History of The National Theatre

Upper Key Stage 2

Theme: Humanities

A short scheme of four lessons aimed at upper Key Stage 2 pupils. Using images and films from the NT archive, pupils will explore the history of The National Theatre and its location on the South Bank.

This unit is broken down into four lessons but you should feel free to take as much or as little time over each exercise as suits you and your class. Each exercise/lesson leads directly on from the last so you can split the unit to suit your needs.

Useful Links:

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<th>All About Theatre</th>
<th><a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ikVhlHQ9LHA&amp;list=PLJgBmjHpqgs6Y3FBTr_m_tDpPl5C5X&amp;index=1">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ikVhlHQ9LHA&amp;list=PLJgBmjHpqgs6Y3FBTr_m_tDpPl5C5X&amp;index=1</a></th>
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<td>An Introduction</td>
<td><a href="http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/your-visit/first-time-visitors">http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/your-visit/first-time-visitors</a></td>
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<td>Puppetry: War Horse</td>
<td><a href="http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/video/the-puppet-makers-behind-war-horse">http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/video/the-puppet-makers-behind-war-horse</a></td>
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<td>Costume Bibles</td>
<td><a href="http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/video/costume-bibles">http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/video/costume-bibles</a></td>
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<td>George Bernard Shaw at original site</td>
<td><a href="http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/video/delivering-deeds-for-the-national-theatre">http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/video/delivering-deeds-for-the-national-theatre</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Characteristics of Modernist Buildings</td>
<td><a href="http://distinctbuild.ca/modern_architecture_defining_characteristics.php">http://distinctbuild.ca/modern_architecture_defining_characteristics.php</a></td>
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Lesson 1: What is the National Theatre?

Learning Intentions

- To research, investigate and record information relating to the purpose of the National Theatre and the work that takes place within it.
- To improve verbal communication skills and develop contributions to group discussions.
- To present findings and express opinions verbally and through a presentation.

Resources

- Images of the National Theatre in the resource pack
- All About Theatre film – link provided in ‘Useful Links’
- National Theatre website – specific links provided in ‘Useful Links’
- Computers
- Journals

Background Facts

- It is over 50 years since the National Theatre Company’s first ever performance.
- The National Theatre Company was formed in 1963 and was based at The Old Vic Theatre for 13 years while waiting for its new home to be completed.
- The first play performed was Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* starring Peter O'Toole on 22 October 1963.
- Since then the National Theatre has produced well over 800 plays.
- The building that exists today was designed by the architect Denys Lasdun and was opened by The Queen in 1976.
- In each of the years since, the National has staged over twenty new productions. Several different productions can be seen in any one week and there are over 1,000 performances every year, given by a company of 150 actors to over 600,000 people, with many more seeing NT productions in the West End, on tour, or via NT Live cinema broadcasts.
Activity

1. Show photographs of the outside of the National Theatre to the class.
2. Ask children if they know what the building is and what it is used for. Ask them to justify their opinions and note down any features they find interesting e.g. tall towers, lots of levels, made of concrete.
3. Repeat using photographs of the inside of the theatre.
4. Show the children the film *All About Theatre*. Discuss points of interest from the film as a class. Ask the children why they think there are three different theatre spaces within one building?
5. In groups or pairs ask the children to use the recommended links and the wider internet to research some key facts about the National Theatre and a backstage area of their choice from the list below:
   - Prop-making
   - Costume
   - Puppetry
   - Wigs and Make-up
   - Music

6. Ask the children to collate their findings and present these to the class.

Reflection

Ask the children to write their own ‘About the NT’ section for the website based on the things they find most interesting about the Theatre.
Lesson 2: Why did they build the National Theatre on the South Bank?

Learning Intentions

- To investigate the historical geography of an area of London.
- To consider the human geography of the area and how it has changed over time.
- To use digital maps and describe specific features of the area, including notable buildings.
- To develop knowledge of the key features of classical architecture and apply this knowledge within their own work.

Resources

- Google Map 1 in resource pack
- NT Plan A in resource pack
- Film of Bernard Shaw at original South Kensington site – link provided in ‘Useful Links’
- Invitation to deeds ceremony with Bernard Shaw in resource pack
- A Plea for London’s National Theatre in resource pack

Background Facts

- The first proposal for a National Theatre was officially made in 1903 by actor-director-author Harley Granville Barker and critic William Archer.
- However, due to the impact of WWI it wasn’t until 1938 that a piece of land in Cromwell Gardens, South Kensington was purchased for a National Theatre to be built on.
- When war broke out a second time, plans for building the theatre came to a halt.
- Following WWII the location for the theatre changed three times before it was finally built on the east side of Waterloo Bridge.
- In 1951 the Queen Mother (who was married to King George VI) laid a foundation stone for the National Theatre next to the new Festival Hall, which had been built for the Festival of Britain.
- In 1952 the Joint Council of the National Theatre and The Old Vic wrote to the Queen Mother to ask her permission to move the foundation stone to a site further down the river between County Hall
and Hungerford Bridge.

- In 1963 the council appointed Denys Lasdun as the architect for the new building.
- In 1967 the current site was chosen. Construction began in 1969 and the building opened seven years later in 1976.

Activity

1. Show the children NT Plan A, the invitation to the deeds ceremony and the image of Google Map 1, explaining that the National Theatre was originally going to be built on this site – Cromwell Gardens.
2. Show the clip of Bernard Shaw receiving the deeds to the land.
3. Use Google Earth or the Street View function on Google Maps to explore the area as it is now.
4. Identify some of the buildings that surround the site. Why might people in the 1930s have thought this would be a good place for a theatre?
5. Look at images of the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Natural History Museum and the Royal Albert Hall as well as A Plea for London’s National Theatre.
6. Ask the children to identify key features of these buildings e.g. columns, arches, domed roofs, symmetrical designs and explain that these are the features of Classical architecture. What might the National Theatre have looked like if it had been built in the style of these buildings? Get them to sketch their ideas.
Lesson 3: Why did they build the National Theatre on the South Bank? Continued

Learning Intentions

- To investigate the historical geography of an area of London.
- To consider the impact of war on social and cultural life in London.
- To use digital maps and describe specific features of the area, including notable buildings.
- To develop an understanding of factors that influence architectural decisions.
- To develop knowledge of the key features of modernist architecture and apply this knowledge within their own work.

Resources

- Pictures of post-war London sourced from the internet
- Google Map 2 in resource pack
- Letter to the Queen Mother and response in resource pack
- Plans for South Bank site next to County Hall in resource pack
- Model for initial design of NT in resource pack (NB this model also includes a proposed opera house next door to the Theatre)
- Characteristics of modernist buildings – link provided in ‘Useful Links’

Activity

1. Begin by showing the children some images of post-war London sourced from the internet.
2. Explain that after the bombing during WWII, London desperately needed regenerating. Art and culture played a key part in this process and the South Bank of the Thames was chosen as an ideal location for new cultural buildings to be built. You may wish to include some work on the Festival of Britain at this point.
3. Show the children Google Map 2 and point out Site 1. This is where the Queen Mother laid the
foundation stone for the building in 1951.

4. Now read the children the letter written to the Queen Mother. Point out Site 2 on the map as you do so.

5. Discuss the reasons given in the letter for Site 2 being a better location for the Theatre. Ask the children how they think the Queen Mother may have responded to this request.

6. Read the response from the Queen Mother.

7. Finally show the children the image NT exterior model. Explain that this was Denys Lasdun’s first design for the theatre. In small groups ask the children to identify the ways in which this design is different to the images from the previous lesson and the sketches that they drew. Examples would be: asymmetrical, use of varying levels, use of straight lines and geometric shapes, simple and straightforward design.

8. Explain that styles of architecture change over time and that this design was Modernist. Ask the children to revisit their designs from the previous lesson and use features from them to create a new design in a modernist style.
Lesson 4: Where would you build a National Theatre?

Learning Intentions

• To investigate, record and develop ideas by collecting information in journals.
• To consider a range of viewpoints on a complex issue and present their own point of view.
• To make informed decisions based on knowledge accumulated in previous lessons.
• To improve verbal communication skills and contribute to group discussions.
• To present findings and express opinions verbally and through a presentation.

Resources

• Google Map 2 in resource pack
• Google Earth
• Journals

Activity

1. Show the children Google Map 2 and point out Site 3 – this is where the National Theatre stands today. Denys Lasdun liked this site the most and described it as ‘a magical position ... probably the most beautiful site in London.’
2. Discuss positive features of the area surrounding the theatre e.g. the rail and tube stations, the river, a view of St Paul’s Cathedral, Embankment Gardens, restaurants etc.
3. What if the National Theatre were to change site again? Ask the children where they would choose to build it now?
4. Ask the children to work in pairs or groups and use Google Earth to research a new location for the theatre. This could be one of their choosing or one that you specify.
5. Ask them to identify and consider social and geographical features that might be important to have near to the theatre. Consider things like public transport, cafes and restaurants, other local
businesses etc.

6. Get the children to create a ‘pitch’ for their chosen location and present this to the rest of the class.

7. Discuss the suggested locations as a class – you may wish to organize this as a class debate or get the children to take a vote on their favourite suggestion.

**Reflection**

Children write a letter to The Queen in their journals asking permission to move the theatre to the new location and giving reasons for their request.