

ACTIVITY 4

Recommended For

KS3
(History, English, Drama)

Learning Objectives

- To understand the role of theatre in the lives of the prisoners of war at Portchester Castle.
- To explore the type of plays that were performed in the prisoners' theatre at Portchester Castle.



Reconstruction drawing of the prisoners' theatre c.1811.



Photo of the reconstructed prisoners' theatre at Portchester.

Summary

In the early 19th century, prisoners of war were kept at Portchester. In 1811, a large group of prisoners arrived, some of whom had teamed up to create a theatrical troupe while in captivity. The troupe was led by a M. Carré, who had worked behind the scenes at the famous Théâtre Feydeau in Paris. They created a theatre on the ground floor of the keep at Portchester (see reconstruction drawing). English Heritage has rebuilt the theatre to show how it may have looked in the 19th century, for you and your students to enjoy (see photo).

STUDENT ACTIVITIES

Before your visit, introduce students to the genre of theatre known as 'melodrama' which was popular in the 18th and 19th centuries. It's known for its exaggerated character types and sensational plots. To explore melodrama further, put students in groups of three and ask them to prepare a scene, using the character details and short script on the following pages.

During your visit, select one or two groups to perform their scenes on the stage in the prisoners' theatre.

While we encourage you to use the stage for performances, please be aware that the room will be open to the public during your visit.

MORE LEARNING IDEAS

Back in the classroom, students can write their own melodrama scene, using the example on the next page as a model. Their scripts should explore themes of love, jealousy, and good overcoming evil. The storyline should include a villain with a nasty plan, a damsel in distress and a hero who saves the day.

ACTIVITY 4 continued

This script is based on a 19th century, melodrama play called 'Roseliska' written and performed by French prisoners of war at Portchester's theatre. For each of the characters, the acting style should be 'melodramatic' (exaggerated).

Characters

Polowitz – the villain. He is jealous and manipulative. His voice is deep, sinister and low pitched. He moves quickly, with shifty footsteps and hunched shoulders. His body language is tense and suspicious.

Roseliska – the damsel. She is beautiful and kind, and often finds herself in distressing situations. Her voice is soft, feminine and high pitched. She has an upright posture and is very light on her feet. Her gestures are dainty and graceful, unless she is panicked when they become frantic.

Stanislas – the hero. He has a strong sense of justice and gets angry when he sees good people suffering. His voice is calm, strong and low pitched. He moves confidently, with wide strides and his chest puffed out. His gestures are powerful and composed.

Scene

Polowitz: Are you trying to get away from me, madame?

Roseliska: I'm sorry, sir, but my husband arrives today and I must use all of my time getting ready for his return.

Polowitz: I am also looking forward to his arrival for Stanislas is a good friend of mine. [aside – speaking to the audience, the damsel doesn't hear] If only it were in my power to delay his arrival.

Roseliska: This is without doubt the best day of my life. May heaven prevent it being ruined!

Polowitz: Madame, your husband has been away fighting a war. Are you sure he still loves you as much as he did when he left? I know my friend; he loses interest in things very quickly.

Roseliska: Please stop, sir. I won't have this discussion with you. I am certain of my husband's love for me. I would never expect a friend to say such a thing! Those are the words of an enemy.



ACTIVITY 4 continued

Scene (continued)

Polowitz: Forgive me those words. I am not your enemy. The truth is...
I love you.

Roseliska: [shocked] You love me? How dare you say you love me?

Polowitz: My beautiful Roseliska, I have been keeping it a secret my whole life, but now my passion for you is tearing me apart.

Roseliska: Sir...

Polowitz: You are trembling, I see, but the strength of my love for you is my only excuse. [he falls to his knees] I beg you, do not reject the words of a man who is on his knees. I cannot live without you!

Roseliska: I cannot remain here any longer. I must leave. I urge you to forget your love for me. [She goes to leave. The villain holds her back.]

Polowitz: Stop struggling, madame. Your resistance only makes my love stronger.

Roseliska: Cease this, sir. I will listen no longer. [She goes to leave and he holds her back.] Stop this, cruel villain. Be gone, get away from me, every moment near you makes me die a thousand times over.

Polowitz: Oh, I'll leave, but not without locking you up first! I will enjoy the bitter tears you cry. Guards, remove this woman, and take her to the dungeons of my castle at...

Stanislas: Stop there, villain, give me back my wife, and fear for your life!

Roseliska: Good heavens, it's Stanislas!

Polowitz: [he laughs] Ha! Now I can lock your husband in the dungeon and keep you all to myself.

Stanislas: Traitor! You can take our lives, but at least let us die together.

Polowitz: No, I'll hear none of this. You will pay for your arrogance with your life. [Tableau (frozen image) showing Stanislas winning a fight with Polowitz while Roseliska watches.]

Stanislas: Oh, Roseliska, I can finally press you to my heart once more. I am so sorry you had to suffer at the hands of the vile Polowitz.

Roseliska: My husband! We are finally back together.

