

***The Concert / El Concierto*, by Ulises Rodríguez Febles
Translated by William Gregory
Education Pack**

THEMES:

MEMORY & TRAUMA

AGEISM & GENERATIONAL CONFLICTS

POST-COLONIAL IDENTITY

GENRE: Fantastic-magical realism

AGE RESTRICTION: 13+ (strong language)

NUMBER OF CHARACTERS: 7M, 5F (and a dog).

CHARACTER LIST:

JOHNNY – a man of about fifty; wants to reunite his old band, aka Manuel.

OLD WOMAN – rough-sleeper.

MOTHER – Johnny's mum.

WIFE – Butcher's wife.

BUTCHER – band member, aka Zombie.

FATHER-IN-LAW – Father to Wife, Father-in-law to Butcher.

FATHER – Johnny's dad.

MACHUCHA – The Leader's mum.

NURSE – carer to The Leader.

THE LEADER – band member, wheelchair bound, aka Alfredo.

THE SCORPION – band member/drummer.

YOUNG MAN – The Scorpion’s son, aka Ringo.

A DOG – The Scorpion’s dog, aka Samson

LENNON – a statue.

SYNOPSIS:

Set late in 2000, Havana, Cuba, fifty year-old Johnny wants to get his old rock band, The Crusaders, back together for a reunion performance. None of them are interested or able and his attempts open old wounds. Johnny is left alone in front of an audience and the statue of his idol, John Lennon. He must face the music.

Winner of the 2004 Virgílio Piñera Award for best Cuban play.

The Concert was first performed in English at the Royal Court Theatre in 2004, directed by Indhu Rubasingham and performed by Allun Corduner, Zita Sattar, Cherry Morris, Mossie Smith, Trevor Cooper, Ewan Hooper, Roddy Maude-Roxby, Alan Williams and Jimmy Akingbola.

It was later broadcast on the BBC World Service, and staged in 2008 by Upstream Theater, St Louis, Missouri.

The play was originally written in Spanish (Cuban).

KEY MOMENTS:

Scene Seven, pp. 27-33 (3M + 1 dog)

Johnny talks to Scorpion (and his dog) about the reasons why the band disbanded.

Scene One, pp. 3-5 (1F, 1M + 1 statue)

Johnny talks to Lennon's statue and decides to steal it.

Scene Nine, pp. 36-41 (2F, 4M + 1 statue)

The meeting between Johnny, The Butcher and The Leader for a reunion concert.

STEP ONE: ASK

What questions come to the students' minds when they read these key moments? In groups, ask them to come up with questions based on the play which have no easy answers. Think about the universal themes raised above and try to combine more than one concept in each question. Here are some examples:

- Is it ever too late to pursue a dream? Have you ever felt you've become too old to do something you loved? Why?
- What is your national identity? Was it something brought to you by social environment or familial bonds? How does it relate to other identities you assume? (i.e. gender, sexual orientation, common interest groups, etc...)
- Can we think of any recent events where age and the generational gap have played a part in dividing our society? (e.g. General Elections, Referendums; etc...)

Consider these questions across depression and other mental health issues; ageism and generational conflicts; post-colonial societies and national identity, and explore if students can relate to the issues portrayed in this text.

STEP TWO: EXPLORE

Exercise 1:

As generational conflicts are at the core of this text, this could be a good exercise to open the discussions:

IMITATION and EXAGGERATION - Split them into two groups. Students from one group walk around as their characters, if they were already assigned; if not, just ask them to pick a character to explore from the gender they identify as. As the characters walk around the space, students from the other group pair up where each student is walking as a young version of a character is followed by another student which will try to portray the older version of the same character. The student following follows closely but does not touch the character in front. The student following must observe the character in front of them and begin to imitate them. During the exercise, you should ask the students following to increase their exaggeration level by 2, then 4, then 6, then 10. Then, students who are being followed should spin around and repeat the process, now as the followers. How does this affect the actor who was following? Have they found a specific physicality for their character in different ages? For the ones being followed, has being followed modified the way they portrayed the characters they had chosen?

Exercise 2:

At scene one (pp. 3-5) we see Johnny trying to convey his love to his idol in statue form, confessing how transformative his influence was in his life. It is important that actors understand how that relationship is built and how this experience can take a toll on their emotional stability. A good exercise for that could be:

Emotional memory – based on experiments by Stanislavsky.

Participants will take turns, one by one, at a chair in the performance space, which should be placed next to another empty chair. Once the performer enters the performance space they must find a way to sit down in their chair, which happens to be right next to their personal idol. They must interact with that idol, and react as if the idol is interacting with them. Performers then have the liberty to allow interaction to end as they imagine it should end.

How easy was it to reach that chair and sit? How welcoming was your idol for you to sit next to them? How did that interaction go and what did you learn from it?

Exercise 3:

At scene seven (pp. 27-33), we see Johnny and the Scorpion air their dirty laundry, with the latter correcting some of the facts that Johnny seems to misremember. The climax of the play touches upon the concepts of accountability and reliability of memories and an exercise that can be used to explore this is -

Verbatim Theatre Exploration – The Headphone exercise (developed by Kristin Landon-Smith)

- Learn the ‘recorded delivery’ performance technique: copying real dialogue as accurately as possible, through both spoken word and digital recordings.
- Create and share your own verbatim piece

Resources needed:

- MP3 player/recorders or smart phones (enough for one per pair)
- Headphone Splitters (small adapter that allows 2 sets headphones to plug into the same mp3 player socket, easy and cheap to purchase; you need one per pair)
- Headphones

Tasks:

1. Warm up as a group
2. Introduce the group to Verbatim Theatre and the recorded delivery technique.
3. Show examples from the MP3 archive footage to illustrate the technique. A good start could be found here <https://youtu.be/ui3k1wT2yeM>
4. Agree on an interview question/s as a group. The question/s needs to be accessible and personal. For example: Tell me about a time you’ve felt angry? Or tell me about when you’ve been happy?
5. Ensure each pair has one recording device, a pair of headphones each and a splitter to share.
6. In pairs conduct a mini interview (2-3 mins each). Each pair is asked to
7. take it in turns to ask the question/s to their partner, whilst recording the
8. entire interview on a smartphone or mp3 player.
9. Listen back to the interview through the headphones
10. Listen again and this time, as you hear what your partner is saying – repeat

11. their words, word for word. So Person A repeats what Person B is saying in
12. the interview, and vice versa.
13. Each pair presents their partners' interview back to the full group, word for word.
14. Discuss the impact of the stories, technique and performance: What have we learnt? What did we find interesting/ challenging? How would we like to use this in the future?

STEP THREE: FEEDBACK

Discuss what came up for the students. Can they relate with the characters' plight? What was the most interesting thing they learned? Bring students to return to the text and analyse what they are taking away from the exercises for their character study- if they have been assigned their characters already. Once the text is read in its entirety, perhaps pose these further questions:

- How different does one experience the world because of where they were born, the way they learnt a language or an artistic ability? How does that reflect in today's society?
- Was Johnny successful in experiencing the reunion of The Crusaders (his former band)? What is this piece proposing as ways to approach memory and shared experiences?

APPENDIX

ALTERNATIVE SYNOPSIS:

Johnny, a member of a 1960s rock band, temporarily "steals" or rather abducts the John Lennon sculpture from a park and sets out to reunite former band members in order to keep a promise and fulfill a dream: if any of the Beatles ever come to Cuba, they will pay a special tribute to them. From the very complex present of the new millennium in Cuba, the play presents the search for the statue and what might

happen to Johnny. But there is another parallel and more important exploration, the one that uncovers painful ghosts from the 1960s and the affective, sentimental impact of intolerance on the four band members, their immediate family and their future¹.

STRUCTURE:

Scene One - The Fan

JOHNNY is talking to the JOHN LENNON statue in a park and tells him that he has been a Beatles fan along with his old band, The Crusaders. He takes the statue to his garage, The Cavern, named after the Liverpool club where the Beatles often performed. He wants The Crusaders to be the first ones (in Cuba) to pay honor to the Beatles. The Old Woman speaks as if responding to police questions but cannot inform much because she says that she is deaf and blind.

Scene Two – The Visit

JOHNNY shares with JOHN LENNON in The Cavern that he was kicked out of the university in the 1960s because they found his Beatles' records. MOTHER comes in calling him Manuel. She discovers the statue disguised in the middle of Beatles' memorabilia. She is worried about Manuel and his plan to reunite The Crusaders. Something bad has happened to Johnny and the other band members in the past.

Scene Three – The Butcher

After forty years, JOHNNY goes to see the Zombie, to invite him to play one last time. The Crusaders' bassist is now a butcher working with his Father-in-Law. He was sent somewhere bad after being expelled from the university, but the rest of The Crusaders were spared because they were "daddy's boys."

Scene Four – The Visit

BUTCHER visits JOHNNY at The Cavern and tells him never to return to his house. The conversation with JOHNNY stirs up traumatic emotions from the past he thought were forgotten. MOTHER tries to convince JOHNNY to give up his plan.

¹ My reading of *The Concert* is informed by two essays in Spanish on Ulises Rodríguez Febles' playwriting techniques. José Luis García Barrientos, "Claves de la dramaturgia de Ulises Rodríguez Febles." *Análisis de la dramaturgia cubana actual*. La Habana, Ediciones Alarcos, 2011, 177-202; and Amado del Pino, "Los cruzados vuelven a cantar." Ulises Rodríguez Febles, *El concierto y otras obras*. La Habana, Letras Cubanas, 2007, 5-26.

Scene Five – The Leader

JOHNNY goes to talk to the LEADER, guitarist and soul of The Crusaders. MACHUCHA and NURSE explain that the LEADER has had a stroke and is in a wheelchair. JOHNNY's photographs of The Crusaders and their conversation make the LEADER move slightly for the first time.

Scene Six – The Secret Discovered

MOTHER and FATHER enter The Cavern without permission. The latter discovers the Lennon statue and wants to take it somewhere else. During a fight with his Father, we find out more about Johnny's troubled past with the government and his love for rock music. We also learn that his family lives thanks to the soap he sells in the black market. FATHER agrees to leave the statue alone for 24 hours.

Scene 7 – The Scorpion

JOHNNY goes to talk to SCORPION who offers more information about the challenges rock musicians faced in the 60s. YOUNG MAN has a fight with SCORPION because he wants the drums SCORPION is keeping away from him.

Scene 8 – The Crux

In the conversation between JOHNNY and the BUTCHER at the butcher shop we find out the latter was sent to an UMAP camp. The BUTCHER has hidden that past from WIFE and FATHER-IN-LAW.

Scene 9 – The Concert

The LEADER, MACHUCHA, the BUTCHER, and MOTHER are at The Cavern where JOHNNY rehearses "Nowhere Man." JOHNNY brings out John Lennon and everyone leaves except JOHNNY and MOTHER. Johnny begins to sing "Nowhere Man." Police sirens are heard. There is a knock at the door and MOTHER explains that John Lennon was simply sharing some time with them. LENNON gets up, applauds, and walks away disappearing into the distance.