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PRACTICAL GUIDE

A COMPANION RESOURCE TO THE ISTA
THEATRE THEORIST CARDS

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THEATRE THEORY THROUGH PLAY

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The ISTA **Theatre Theorist Cards** turn theatre theory from something students memorise into something they experience. Each card introduces one theatre-maker, theorist or practitioner, alongside a short summary of their central idea or approach to theatre-making, expressed as something to test practically rather than a fact to recall.

DON'T STUDY IT. STAGE IT.

Students rarely remember theatre theory because they read about it. They remember it because they tried it, and felt what changed when they did. Each card turns a practitioner's idea into a question a group can answer with their bodies, voices and choices: what happens if we work this way? Theory becomes something to experiment with, not simply revise.

This guide shares the method behind that process: how to use a card to test an idea, and how to build that into devising, rehearsal, research and assessment.

Who This Guide Is For

The method in this guide, and the cards it is built around, are written primarily for older students encountering theatre theory in depth, though the practical activities can be introduced earlier.

- ✓ IB DP Theatre
- ✓ A Level Theatre Studies and other pre-university courses
- ✓ BTEC Performing Arts
- ✓ MYP Arts and upper Key Stage 3, for practical exploration ahead of formal theory
- ✓ Independent research projects, theatre journals and portfolios
- ✓ Teacher training and staff CPD

This guide is written primarily for older students studying theatre theory as part of a course. The practical activities can also be adapted for younger learners as an introduction to different ways of making theatre, without requiring detailed theoretical knowledge. They are not designed for primary-age students.



The ISTA **Theatre Theorist Cards** are provided as three separate sets, each a full deck of playing cards. Every card introduces one theatre-maker, theorist or practitioner, alongside a short summary of their central idea or approach to theatre-making.

Across the three sets, the cards cover a wide range of traditions, eras and approaches to theatre-making, from naturalism to physical theatre, from text-based work to devised and ensemble practice. Each set can be used on its own, or combined with the others for a wider range of perspectives.

Set 1: Story and Narrative

Explore practitioners who transformed how theatre tells stories, examines society, and uses performance to question, reflect and communicate ideas about the human experience.

Set 2: Movement and Physical Theatre

Discover practitioners who place the body, voice and movement at the heart of performance, using physical expression as a powerful tool for communication, character and storytelling.

Set 3: Production and Stage Design

Investigate practitioners who reshape theatrical experiences through innovative approaches to space, design, technology and visual storytelling, creating powerful worlds for audiences to inhabit.

Because each set follows the structure of a deck of playing cards, suits and ranks can be used as an extra layer for games and structured activities, as well as straightforward stimulus cards.

The cards are divided into four suits, each representing a different aspect of theatre-making:



Rather than presenting a theorist as a single set of beliefs, the cards explore how their thinking influences these different areas of practice. This helps students see the breadth of each practitioner's work and provides multiple entry points for practical exploration, discussion and comparison.

This guide is written to work with any of the three sets, on their own or in combination.



WAYS TO USE THE CARDS

The same cards can do very different jobs depending on how you frame them. Here are some of the ways drama departments use Theatre Theorist Cards across a course.

In the classroom

- **Starter:** Pick one card and give groups one minute to read it before creating a short response.
- **Plenary:** After a piece of work, ask which practitioner's approach it most resembles, and why.
- **Devising stimulus:** Use a card as the starting point for a new piece, before any discussion of subject matter.
- **Rehearsal reset:** When a scene feels predictable, pick a card and replay the scene through that practitioner's approach.
- **Comparative analysis:** Pick two cards and ask students to identify where the approaches agree, and where they conflict.
- **Assessment task:** Set a card, or a small hand of cards, as the basis for a practical or written task.
- **Cover lesson:** Hand a small set of cards to a cover teacher with simple instructions. The structure runs itself.
- **Ensemble building:** Use a shared card early in a new group's life to give everyone a common starting point and vocabulary.

Beyond the classroom

- **Research project:** Use a card as the starting point for independent research into a practitioner, tradition or movement.
- **Script exploration:** Apply a card to a scripted scene to discover what changes when it is approached through that practitioner's ideas.
- **Warm-up:** Use a single card as a two-minute physical or vocal warm-up before any rehearsal.
- **Written reflection:** Ask students to record which practitioner's ideas shaped a piece of work, and how, in a journal or portfolio.
- **Theatre club:** Run a regular "card of the session" to introduce new approaches to a returning group.
- **Staff CPD:** Use the deck as a shared way for staff to discuss their own practice and influences.

THE CORE METHOD: PICK A CARD

Every activity in this guide, and every activity in the deck, runs on the same five-step method. Once a group knows it, you can use a Theatre Theorist Card in any spare five minutes.

1. **Pick a card.** Any deck, any card. Draw at random for breadth, or choose deliberately to introduce a specific practitioner or approach.
2. **Set a time limit.** One minute to read and prepare, ten to twenty to create. The limit keeps the focus on trying the idea, not perfecting it.
3. **Apply the idea fully.** Whatever the card describes, build it into the work as a genuine starting point, not a label added afterwards.
4. **Share and name it.** Show the work, then describe what changed because of this practitioner's approach, and what stayed the same.
5. **Decide what to keep.** The approach does not have to define the final piece. Often, one discovery made while trying it is enough.

Scaling the method

- **A spare five minutes:** one card, one short improvisation, one moment named afterwards.
- **A single lesson:** one card to create, a second to compare or challenge it, and a shared reflection at the end.
- **A workshop (60 minutes or more):** several cards drawn at different stages, moving from individual exploration to comparison and synthesis.
- **A term-long project:** a small hand of cards drawn at key milestones, used to test, challenge and refine the same piece as it develops.

USING THE PLAYING-CARD FORMAT

Each Theatre Theorist Cards set follows the structure of a deck of playing cards, with suits and ranks, and may include jokers. This opens up activities beyond the single-card draw described in the Core Method.

- **Deal a hand:** Deal each group a small hand of cards, three to five, instead of a single card. Groups choose one to build around, keeping the others in reserve to introduce later in rehearsal, or to challenge a choice another group has made.
- **Suits as starting groups:** If you want a quick way to divide a large class, use the four suits to split students into four working groups, each drawing only from their own suit for an activity. This gives every group a different, naturally varied set of starting points without any extra preparation.
- **Pairs and sequences:** Ask students to find a pair, two cards of the same rank, or a short run of consecutive ranks, and explore what connects or contrasts the approaches on those cards. This works well as a quick analytical task: what would these practitioners agree on, and where would they disagree?



These two frameworks work with any card in any of the three sets, and can be repeated with a different practitioner each time.

1

Borrow The Lens

DEVISING (20–30 MIN) | GROUPS OF 3–5

Pick a card that introduces a practitioner's central idea or approach to making theatre.

1. Read the card together and identify the single idea or approach it describes.
2. Choose a simple starting point: an object, a piece of music, a short text, or a situation.
3. Build a short piece (2–4 minutes) that puts the card's idea into practice as directly as possible.
4. Share the piece and discuss which choices came directly from the card, and which came from the group.

Tip: Encourage groups to follow the idea even when it feels unfamiliar or uncomfortable. The most useful discoveries often come from approaches a group would not normally choose.

Each set introduces practitioners with very different central ideas, so the same framework produces a different piece of work every time.

2

Why Would They Change?

DEVISING (20–25 MIN) | GROUPS OF 3–5

Pick a card that introduces a practitioner with a distinctive approach to one element of theatre-making, such as the performer, the space, the audience or the story.

1. Take a short scene the group has already created, or devise one quickly.
2. Read the card and identify the one element of theatre-making it focuses on most strongly.
3. Revise the scene by changing only that element, in line with the practitioner's approach.
4. Share both versions and discuss what changed, and what stayed the same.

Tip: Keep everything else in the scene fixed. The clearer the single change, the easier it is to see what the practitioner's idea actually does.

Different cards focus on different elements of theatre-making, so this framework can be repeated to explore performer, space, audience and story in turn.

These two frameworks turn a card into the starting point for research, while keeping practical exploration at the centre of the work.

1

Practice First, Research Second

RESEARCH (ONGOING) | INDIVIDUAL OR PAIRS

Pick a card that introduces a practitioner whose ideas the group has not yet explored practically.

1. Without reading any further information, use the card alone to create a short practical response, following the Core Method.
2. Afterwards, research the practitioner: who they were, what problem they were trying to solve, and what influenced their ideas.
3. Compare the group's practical response with what the research reveals. What matches the practitioner's own thinking? What differs?
4. Identify where those ideas are still visible in theatre, film or performance today.

Tip: Doing the practical work first means research questions come from genuine curiosity about what the group just experienced, rather than from a blank page.

Any card can anchor this framework. The research stage is the same regardless of which practitioner the group draws.

2

Build the Case

RESEARCH (30–40 MIN) | GROUPS OF 3–4

Pick a card that introduces a practitioner with a clear position on what theatre is for, or how it should be made.

1. Research the practitioner's central position using the card as a starting point.
2. Prepare a short practical demonstration, no more than two minutes, that embodies that position as clearly as possible.
3. Present the demonstration to the class, followed by a brief explanation of the thinking behind it.
4. Invite the class to question or challenge the position, and respond using both the research and the practical work as evidence.

Tip: Encourage students to defend the practitioner's position even if they personally disagree with it. Understanding an idea well enough to argue for it is a strong test of research.

This framework works well as a structured run-through of several cards across a class, with each group taking a different practitioner.



Once students are comfortable testing one idea at a time, try combining or comparing cards. This is where the cards move from individual exploration into dialogue, between practitioners, and between students.

1

Theorist Swap

1. Groups begin devising a short scene, working from one card.
2. Partway through rehearsal, groups swap their card for a different one, often with another group.
3. Without restarting, groups continue developing the same scene, now reinterpreting it through the new card's approach.
4. Discuss how the change in approach changed the scene, and what survived the swap.

2

Four Corners

Label four areas of the room with broad aspects of theatre-making, such as the performer, the space, the audience and the story. After reading a card, students move to whichever area they think the card's approach emphasises most strongly, and explain their choice to whoever else is standing there. Regroup and discuss any disagreements: the same card can reasonably point in more than one direction.

3

Side By Side

Pick two cards and ask groups to create two very short responses to the same starting point, one for each card. Perform them back to back and discuss what the comparison reveals about each practitioner's priorities, and about the starting point itself.



These prompts can be used after any activity in this guide, whether it lasted two minutes or two weeks. Choose two or three rather than working through the whole list.

BEFORE

- What question does this practitioner seem to be asking about theatre?
- What do we expect to find easy, or difficult, about working this way?
- What would we do differently without this card?

DURING

- How has this approach changed our choices so far?
- What are we discovering that we would not have found otherwise?
- Where does this approach feel natural, and where does it feel forced?

AFTER

- What discoveries would we not have made without this idea?
- Which elements are worth keeping, even if we move away from this approach?
- Which aspects of this practitioner's thinking challenge our own assumptions about theatre?
- How did the audience respond to choices that came directly from this card?



THEORY THROUGH PRACTICE: WHY THE METHOD WORKS

Everything so far in this guide is ready to use immediately. This section explains the thinking behind it, for anyone who wants the fuller picture.

Theatre theory is often taught as a body of knowledge to be learned about: who said what, when, and in response to what. The ISTA Theatre Theorist Cards take a different starting point. Each card treats a practitioner's idea as a tool, something that changes what happens when a group of people get up and make theatre together, and asks students to find out what that change feels like before they are asked to explain it.

How The Method Puts This Into Practice

Each card gives students a different lens for looking at the same starting point:

- **Trying an idea practically**, before naming or analysing it, builds an embodied understanding that reading alone cannot.
- **Comparing two practitioners' approaches** to the same material makes differences visible in a way that descriptions of those differences rarely achieve.
- **Returning to the same practitioner's ideas** at different points in a course allows students to notice how their own understanding has developed.
- **Treating an idea as something to test**, rather than something to agree or disagree with, lowers the stakes of trying approaches that feel unfamiliar.

Used this way, theory becomes part of a student's practical toolkit, available to reach for when a piece of work needs a new perspective, rather than a separate subject to revise before an exam.

Framing This With Students

It can help to introduce a practitioner's card as a question rather than an answer: what would change if we worked this way? Students do not need to agree with, or even fully understand, an idea before trying it. Often, the practical work generates the questions that make the theory worth reading afterwards.



ACCESSING A NEW THEORIST

Across most senior theatre and drama courses, students are at some point asked to engage with a practitioner or theorist they have not studied before: researching their work, applying their methodology to a devised or scripted piece, or analysing a text through their lens. The cards are built for exactly this moment. Each one introduces an unfamiliar name alongside a single idea worth testing, so a student can find out what that idea does before committing weeks of work, or a written assignment, to it.

ENGAGE, THEN EXPLORE

The method in this guide works best in this order: engage with the card practically first, then explore the practitioner's wider work and context. Trying an idea before reading about it gives students something real to anchor their research to, a felt sense of what the practitioner is actually asking for, rather than a name and a date to memorise.

- **Engage:** pick a card and use one of the Devising Frameworks earlier in this guide to test the idea practically, before any research takes place.
- **Make:** build a short piece of work, however rough, that puts the card's idea into action. This is the evidence a student needs before deciding whether to commit further.
- **Explore further:** once the practical work has raised real questions, move into proper research, primary sources in the practitioner's own words, and secondary sources discussing their wider influence and context.

The cards are a way in, not a substitute for that research. A card can introduce a name and a single aspect worth testing; it cannot stand in for reading or hearing a practitioner's own words, which most courses require directly.

A STARTING SEQUENCE USING THE CARDS

1. **Survey:** deal a small hand of cards, three to five, drawn only from practitioners the student has not studied before. Read each one briefly.
2. **Test:** using Borrow the Lens, give each shortlisted practitioner five to ten minutes of practical testing, built around a simple, neutral starting point such as an object, a short piece of text or a single image.
3. **Narrow:** discuss which attempts produced something worth developing further, and which felt forced or unclear. This is a useful early indicator of whether an idea can sustain a longer piece of work.
4. **Commit and research:** once a practitioner and idea are chosen, move into proper research using primary and secondary sources, since this guide is a starting point and cannot replace that stage.
5. **Develop:** return to What Would They Change? periodically through rehearsal or development, to check whether the idea is still shaping the work's choices, not just its description in a journal or essay.



READY FOR THE FULL DECKS?

This guide gives you the method: how to use a card to test a practitioner's idea, and how to build that into devising, rehearsal, research and assessment.

Each deck gives you the material: a full set of theatre-makers, theorists and practitioners, presented as practical tools rather than historical facts, ready to draw, combine and return to throughout a course.

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About ISTA

ISTA is a global arts education charity that supports schools offering theatre worldwide by providing dynamic festivals, high-quality training, and practical resources for students, teachers, and artists. Rooted in collaboration and creativity, it celebrates ensemble-based, intercultural learning through inspiring and inclusive theatre experiences.

