



GCSE Drama
Noughts & Crosses

by

Malorie Blackman

Adapted for stage by

Sabrina Mahfouz



Historical context

Malorie Blackman is a best-selling children and young adult (YA) author and was appointed as Children's Laureate from 2013 to 2015. Her novel **Noughts & Crosses** was first published in 2001 and was an immediate success. Two years later, it was included in the BBC Big Read list of Top 100 novels and was the only work of a black writer to feature. The book is set in Albion, a segregated society where light-skinned noughts are suppressed by the ruling black Crosses. It tells the story of the forbidden love between a Cross named Sephy and a nought named Callum. When first published, it had an immediate and powerful impact: 'A fable that tips the world upside down, challenging assumptions some of us never knew we had', the New Statesman wrote.

Malorie Blackman commented:

'Noughts & Crosses wasn't so much a book I wanted to write as a book I needed to write. It was born of a number of factors, including – but not limited to – a need to deal with a number of events from my past, a desire to tackle the subject of racism head on, and the burning anger I felt regarding the death of Stephen Lawrence and the subsequent mishandling of the police inquiry into his death.'

Blackman wasn't sure how both critics and the public would receive the novel:

'I knew I was writing a book that would make some adults very uncomfortable (and it did!) because I was dealing with racism, terrorism, the class system and the artificial divides we always seem to put between ourselves and others. But it was a risk I was willing to take.'

The risk paid off as it remains one of the most popular novels for young adults, voted as one of the UK's best-loved books and is now a modern classic.

In 2007, Dominic Cooke adapted the novel for the stage for the RSC and, in 2020, the BBC broadcast a six-part series based on an adaptation of the novel. The series takes place in present-day London in an alternate history where, 700 years prior, several nations in West Africa combined to form the powerful African Empire and went on to colonise Europe.

In 2016, Sabrina Mahfouz began working on a new adaptation of the novel, which toured the UK in 2019. It was commissioned by the Pilot Theatre in co-production with four regional theatres: Derby Theatre, Belgrade Theatre in Coventry, Mercury Theatre in Colchester and York Theatre Royal. Pilot Theatre is an international touring company based in York. Their aim is to create high quality theatre for younger audiences. They work outside traditional theatre buildings:

'...our projects pursue a relationship with our audience that is often playful, interactive and participatory. We are always curious about our changing relationship with technology and often pursue this theme. Across all our projects we seek to create a cultural space where young adults can encounter, express and interrogate big ideas which are relevant to our lives right now.'

Under the direction of Esther Richardson, the company began working on the new adaptation, ensuring it was a collaboration with people who truly understood the themes and complex issues raised:

'It's been vital to have a fully open casting process, and a creative team who were able to bring their own lived experiences of these subjects into the rehearsal room to inform our work. It's also been vital to develop the piece in parallel with work with young people, inviting a group of them to be part of the process.'

Malorie Blackman once commented that her greatest wish was for *Noughts & Crosses* to be 'no longer relevant'. However, the issues the novel/play raises are still as important and relevant in contemporary society as when the novel was first published.

Task

Find two examples from the play that highlight the social/historic contexts of *Noughts & Crosses*.

Original Staging Conditions

- The play was first performed by Pilot Theatre on 1st February, 2019, at Derby Theatre.
- The theatre has two theatre spaces. *Noughts & Crosses* was staged in the main auditorium, which has seating for up to 530. It has an **end-on stage**.



- The set, designed by Simon Kenny, created a dystopian reality. A series of panels morphed from walls to apertures to cupboards. This structure was constantly folding and changing. The panels would suddenly transform into banks of video screens or live TV transmissions. The set created a recognisable world but also another, parallel world. Chairs and tables became mirrors. Barricades represented chaos as violence erupted. The predominant colours were red tones:

'...non-natural, lending a brutal, futuristic feel. Red is also the colour of blood and fire and sexuality, and the saturated, claustrophobia of the singular shade heightens the energy in the whole piece'. (Phillip Lowe, East Midlands Theatre online)

Props were simple and naturalistic to suggest both character and location, e.g. a crystal wine glass and decanter, a rucksack used as a school bag, etc.

- The set was enhanced by Joshua Pharo's lighting design. He used neon, direct, mood and sectional lighting. This emphasised the structural qualities of the set and reinforced the modern setting. Strobes and haze were used to create atmosphere and location. Infrared was the dominant colour. Projections of news footage gave the play an authenticity and immediacy.
- The sound and music had a cinematic feel and worked in conjunction with the lighting to conjure up locations and atmosphere, e.g. a secluded seashore and the terrorist atrocity.
- Costume was naturalistic and gave the production a contemporary feel, reflecting the age and status of the characters. The colour used in the Crosses' costumes were *'bright and jewel-like in their wealthy fabrics; the noughts faded and wrung out'*. The colour scheme of the set was echoed in the uniforms for Heathcroft School and the Liberation Militia.

Component 3

Questions in Component 3 could focus on how meaning is interpreted and communicated through the following:

- use of performance space and spatial relationships on stage, including the impact of different stages
- design of lighting, sound, set (including props) and costumes, hair and make-up.

The following tasks will help you explore different design ideas. Remember you don't have to stay with the original design in your exam response. Experiment with different design ideas and apply them to different scenes from the play to see which are the most creative/effective.

Tasks

Noughts & Crosses was originally staged using an expressionistic set, which was adapted to suggest the different locations throughout the play. The set design also used elements to highlight some of the key themes and atmosphere of the play, e.g. racism/division, privilege, misinformation and chaos. Look at following images from plays that deal with racial division. The first image is the original set design by Pilot Theatre.

(a)



(b)



(c)



(d)



1. With a partner, choose one of the images. Explain how it could help to create the atmosphere of *Noughts & Crosses* and why you think it could be effective.
2. Choose one image that you think would be the least effective in creating the atmosphere of the play. Explain the reasons for your choice.
3. Choose one of the images where you think colour is used effectively. Explain the reasons for your choice.
4. One review of the Pilot's production of *Noughts & Crosses* commented:

'Simon Kenny's abstract set is suitably dark and oppressive and there are some gasp-worthy moments created by Joshua Druelas Pharo's lighting design and Adam McCreedy's sound design working in harmony. The use of projected film feels both modern and at times strikingly reminiscent of Civil Rights-era America.'

Design an expressionistic set for a contemporary production of *Noughts & Crosses* that could be performed on a **thrust** stage. Explain your choice of set and props, use of colour and fabric. Explain how your design will convey the themes of the play to an audience. Also consider how your design can easily be adapted to accommodate the quick transition of scenes.

5. The opening scenes of *Noughts & Crosses* suggest two different locations (Prologue/ Act One). As a designer, create a set for this scene using a **traverse** stage. Explain your choice of style, set and props, use of colour, fabric and style and how these choices create atmosphere. Also explain where you would position the actors, giving reasons for your decision.

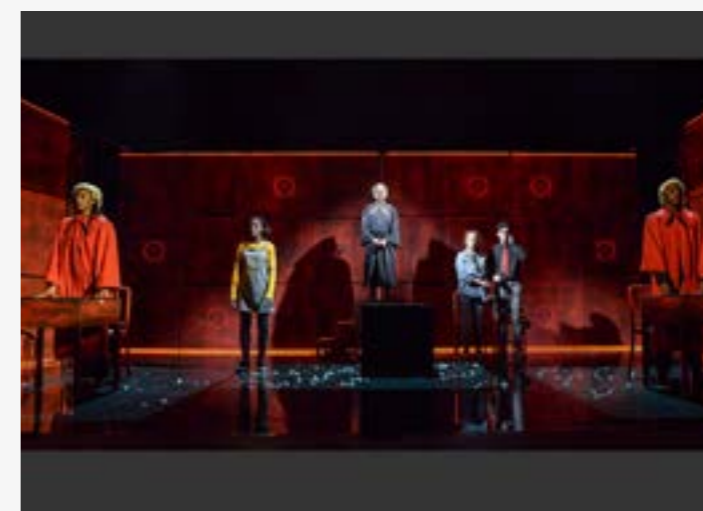
Lighting

Projections, film and stylized lighting were used in the original production to help create a variety of locations and atmosphere. Lighting, music and sound are pivotal in helping to create the variety of different locations, atmosphere and contribute to the transitions between each episode of Sephy and Callum's world.

Task

1. Look at the following images, which are from Pilot Theatre and LIPA's productions of *Noughts & Crosses*.

With a partner, discuss the effectiveness of the lighting in helping to create atmosphere in these scenes. Explain what atmosphere and meaning the designer is trying to convey to an audience.





2. As a designer, choose one extract from *Noughts & Crosses* and explain how you would use lighting to create atmosphere. Think about:

- intensity/strength of lighting
- focus
- special effects
- colour
- gobos
- types of lanterns.

Music/Sound

Tasks

1. In groups of four, record a soundscape that could be used for the **Prologue**. Decide at which points in the scene it would be played to help create atmosphere and location. Create a cue sheet showing where it would be faded in/out, intensity of volume, etc.
2. Choose a piece of contemporary music or a song that could be used for the opening of Scene Two. Explain the reasons for your choice.
3. Choose a piece of music or a song that could be used as the 'theme' for Jake and played at key moments when he appears. Explain the reasons for your choice.
4. Choose one scene from the play and create a list of sound effects you would use. Explain how and why the SFX you have chosen could be used to create atmosphere, location, period of the play, etc.

Tasks

With a partner, look at the images below showing how the character of Sephy was portrayed in two different productions of *Noughts & Crosses*.



1. Explain the costume choice each designer has made. In your answer, consider the following:
 - period of the play
 - choice of material/fabric
 - garments
 - colour
 - accessories
 - hair/makeup
 - style.
2. As a designer, create the costume for one of the characters for a contemporary production of *Noughts & Crosses*. Explain the style, garments, colour, fabric, accessories, hair and make up you have chosen and reason for your choices.

Tasks

1. As a designer, create a mood board for the costume of Ryan.
2. Using this [template](#), design the following:
 - suitable stage makeup for the character of Ryan
 - an expressionistic mask for the character of Ryan.

The structure of the play

- The structure is how the plot or story is laid out, including a beginning, a middle and an end. The structure of *Noughts & Crosses* is known as **story theatre**; characters stand back and comment on the action as well as take part. They share their thoughts and feelings, comment on events, provide transitional information from one episode to another and help to cover the expository material handled in the novel's narrative.
- **Story theatre** tends to use very little set and few props, which are carefully selected and designed. This way, action can proceed quickly without elaborate set changes.
- Story theatre is highly **episodic**. The action takes place in a variety of places during many scenes. Each episode gives the audience an insight into characters and events that have played a significant part in Sephy and Callum's relationship and the society they are part of.
- The **episodic structure** allows different perspectives to be viewed by the audience, e.g. Sephy and Callum's family life and their relationships within the family.
- The structure is also **linear**. Although the play begins with a flashback and there are flashbacks in Act 2 to suggest the passing of time, generally the play follows the story of Sephy and Callum from beginning to end.

Tasks

1. Choose one of the episodes from the play *Noughts & Crosses*. Explain the function of that episode in the overall play.
2. Look at the Prologue. Describe techniques the playwright uses to present this scene. Explain how effective each technique is from an audience's perspective. *Noughts & Crosses* falls into a number of possible styles.
 - Sephy and Callum's story is unfolded using **narration and storytelling**. The playwright uses the characters to tell the story of what is happening, e.g. Act 2. This is a quick and highly effective way of giving us information and moving the plot quickly and efficiently.
 - There are elements of **epic theatre**. This is a type of political theatre that addresses contemporary issues. Bertolt Brecht developed it, although later in his life he preferred to call it dialectal theatre. Epic theatre uses a number of techniques to distance the audience, allowing them to remain objective so they could make rational judgments about any social

comments or issues. There are a number of techniques associated with epic theatre that are used in *Noughts & Crosses*, e.g. minimal setting, clear political point or focus, direct address to the audience, episodic structure and use of captions and projections.

- There are also elements of **realism**. Even though the play is set in the future, there are elements that give it a contemporary feel, e.g. elements of the political set-up and Kamal being the home secretary. The play also reflects events from Malorie Blackman's life and events we frequently hear about in the news, e.g. the bombing of civilians. Although there are some stylised characters, the main characters are generally naturalistic.

Tasks

1. Use the following Brechtian techniques to explore how this style is used:
 - Choose an episode and a significant prop for one of the characters in the scene. Explore how the one item can be used in a variety of ways. Explain its dramatic effectiveness.
 - *Gestus* is a clear gesture or movement used by the actor that captures a moment or attitude. Can an audience tell by the actor's gesture what is happening in a scene? Choose one scene from *Noughts & Crosses* and explore a suitable *gestus* for each character. Explain what information it gives the audience at that point in the play.
 - A placard is a sign or additional piece of written information presented on stage. It can be as simple as holding up a handwritten sign or a multimedia or PowerPoint slideshow. Choose one of the scenes and explore where you could use this technique. Explain what format it will take, e.g. projected images, and the dramatic impact you want it to have.
2. Compile a list of scenes from the play. In groups, create still images of each key moment within each scene. Give each scene a caption.

Task

1. In a group, choose one scene and complete the following tasks:
 - Decide on the **minimal** amount of set that is required to create the world of the scene.
 - Explore practically the different techniques the actors would use to create the world of the episode, e.g. use of mime.
 - Explain the relationship you want to create between the actors and audience in the scene.
2. In groups of five, read pages 26 and 27 and make notes on the following:
 - What information do we learn about each of the characters?
 - What is the tone of this scene?
 - What style is this scene? Give reasons for your choice.

Character work

For Component 3, you should focus on the following:

- the function of a character within an extract
- how meaning is interpreted through an actor’s vocal and physical interpretation
- character interaction
- relationship between performer and audience.

Tasks

Use the following exercises to familiarise yourself with the characters within the play and how they could be interpreted in performance.

1. Create a list of all the characters within the play. Decide on three words that you think best describes each character.
2. Working in groups of four, create a mood board for four key characters within the play. Look for pictures, poems, lyrics, artwork, newspaper cuttings, etc. to give you an understanding and inspiration of your character and their personality. Knowing basic details about your character that you can reference on your board will keep you focused. It will also help you understand the different facets of their character because it will help you to focus on small details.
3. In groups of six, create a character poster. Choose one word to describe the character and a quote from the play to justify it. Each group should choose a different key character from the play and then share your resource with the rest of the class.
4. The function of a character within an extract refers to their special purpose, why they are in that specific scene, e.g. the function of Dionne on page 27 is to provide tension and highlight attitudes towards the noughts and anyone who supports them. Look at pages 79-80 with a partner. Discuss the function of Jackie in this scene. What do this scene and the character contribute to the play as a whole?

The **Component 3** written paper will focus on the three acting skills - voice, movement and interaction - and how these skills can be used by an actor to communicate their character to an audience.

Vocal work

Here is a glossary of key terms relating to voice:

Pitch	Speaking in a low, high or natural voice.
Pause	A dramatic pause or silence at a key moment can build tension and emotions such as fear.
Tempo or pace	The speed in which someone speaks.
Tone/expression	This suggests your mood and your intention towards the listener.
Volume	The effect of a character speaking loud, quiet or using a stage whisper.
Accent	Indicating where someone is from or their status in society.
Emphasis	The pressure on certain words to make them stand out.
Intonation	The rise and fall of your voice. Intonation helps us to say what we mean.
Subtext	The underlying meaning of the words that are being spoken.

Task

1. Look at the end of the scene between Callum and Sephy on page 6. Explain what vocal choices you would make to communicate the characters to an audience. **Focus on tone, tempo, volume, pause, emphasis of key words and intonation.**
2. In a group, choose two contrasting scenes from the play. Explore the vocal choices you would make for each character within the scene. Make notes on how successful your vocal choices were.
3. Look at Callum’s speech on Page 80. Explain what the speech tells the audience about the character and their mood. What vocal choices would you make to communicate the character to an audience? **Focus on tone, tempo, volume, pause, emphasis of key words and intonation.**

Elements of movement

- **Posture and stance:** the position in which a character holds their body, e.g. when they are standing or sitting. A very confident character may dominate the space, with a very upright posture.
- **Pace of movement:** e.g. does a character move quickly or slowly? A queen might enter moving slowly, highlighting to the audience their status and power. The pace of a character’s movement will change according to the scene.

- **Gait:** a person's manner of walking will form part of their characterisation, e.g. the character of Winston in the play *1984* will walk in a very slow, deliberate way.
- **Quality of movement:** e.g. a performer playing the role of a victim might move with very light movement to indicate they are trying to avoid attention, whereas a more aggressive character might move with very heavy, definite movement.
- **Gestures:** the way people communicate with their hands or other parts of their body, e.g. when Winston is being questioned by O'Brien in the play *1984*, the gesture he might use is the clenching of his fists to show his tension.
- **Body language:** it may be the way the message is conveyed to an audience, or it may add an added layer to the words that are spoken.
- **Facial expressions:** how the face is used to convey an emotional state.
- **Eye contact:** the state in which two people look into each other's eyes. This could be used to establish status, control and passion.
- **Proxemics:** how the space is used on stage to establish relationships and mood.
- **Levels** can make a scene look visually interesting but the positioning of characters on different levels can also suggest social status and create atmosphere.

Task

Look at the images below. After you have viewed each image carefully, answer the questions that follow.



1. Describe the **posture, positioning and facial expressions** of the characters. What does it communicate to the audience about the relationship between Callum and Sephy at this point in the play?



2. What does the **body language, facial expressions and proxemics** of Minerva and Sephy communicate to the audience about their relationship and state of mind at this point in the play?



3. At which point from the play do you think this image is from? Explain your choice. Describe the relationship of the characters based on their **proxemics, posture and facial expressions**.



4. What does **the posture, gesture and facial expression** communicate to an audience about Kamal's mood and character at this point in the play?

Tasks

These questions examine how you can use space to explore character relationships.

Look at the diagram below, which explores the positioning of characters and the semiotics of that position:



1. Look at pages 73-74. In pairs, decide where you would position the characters to explore the changing relationships and atmosphere within the scene.
2. As a director, choose three rehearsal techniques you would use to explore the relationship between the characters within the scene.
3. With a partner, choose a scene between Callum and Sephy. Using the diagram explore how the status between the characters changes throughout the play.
4. In groups, create an improvised split scene based on pages 26 and 27 (two scenes which are performed on stage at the same time). One half of the group are Crosses discussing the arrival of noughts at the school. The other half are noughts discussing the reaction of the Crosses. Switch between scenes throughout. Explain how effective this technique is.

Key Themes

Racism and prejudice

In this world, society is turned on its head. It's a powerful, wealthy, black ruling class who are discriminating against whites. Crosses with dark skin are seen as the superior race and noughts with light skin are seen as inferior. The theme is explored throughout with a number of key scenes highlighting this theme, e.g. when the noughts go to Heathcroft for the first time. The world of the novel has many close parallels to the civil rights movement in the USA. The atmosphere of the play is permeated by tension because of the way the noughts are treated, e.g. the creation of the of the Liberation Militia (LM), the bombing, etc. To make the racism convincing, there are several incidents and details that have happened in realty, e.g. the colour of plasters.

Identity

In the play (and in reality), individuals are defined by their class and the colour of their skin. Because Callum and Sephy have grown up together and are friends, they can see beyond the labels. As the play progresses, they reject the labels and the prejudices that goes with them and make their own choices, even though there are terrible consequences.

Violent and peaceful protest

The play looks at the ways people respond to situations they believe are wrong. Oppressing the noughts results in terrible consequences, often for innocent people. The bombing of the shopping centre has terrible consequences for not only the victims but the McGregor family as well. The play also makes the audience think about why people turn to violence. Ryan, Jude and Callum join the LM because it's the only way they can try and make their voices heard. The play doesn't support violence but it does suggest that people without any political power may feel forced to make themselves heard.

Love and friendship

This is primarily explored through the relationship between Callum and Sephy; their friendship is warm and intense and, in spite of everything, remains strong until the end. Sephy decision to keep the baby and defend how it was conceived highlights the depth of the relationship. It stands as a symbol of hope in a desolate world.

Task

1. Working with a partner, compile a list of scenes where the theme of **racism and prejudice** are explored.
2. Using the rehearsal technique of **hot seating**, prepare a list of five questions for Shania and Lola, which explore their attitudes to each other. Compare and contrast their attitudes.
3. In groups, create three still images that illustrate the theme of **racism and prejudice** in the play.

- Working with a partner, choose a scene that illustrates the theme of **violent and peaceful protest**. Compile a list of sound effects and music you would use and decide at what points you would use them to help create atmosphere.
- Using the same scene, compile a list of images that could be used as projections to highlight the theme of **violent and peaceful protest** for a contemporary production in a studio space.

Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts and literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes, e.g. the beach, which is a place of calm and refuge in a chaotic and violent world.

- Make notes on what other motifs are explored within the play and the dramatic effect they have.
- As a set designer, compile a mood board based on **one** of these motifs for a forthcoming production of **Noughts & Crosses**.
- Racism and prejudice are particularly relevant in the 21st century. Use the Internet to find an example of racism or prejudice. In groups, devise a piece of theatre based on your findings. Explore:
 - the style of your performance
 - what techniques you will use to tell the story
 - staging
 - themes and messages.

Contemporary staging of the play

'In its tale of oppression and rebellion, the book evokes the struggles of the ANC and the American civil rights movement. In its portrait of everyday discrimination, it speaks of the here and now.' (Mark Fisher, Guardian review, 2019)

Since the book was first published in 2001, there have been many stage and television adaptations. The first stage adaptation in 2008 was directed by Dominic Cook for the RSC. This production used the two main characters, Sephy and Callum, as narrators, enabling the audience to see the action from both their points of view. The audience sat on three sides and speeches and asides were delivered directly to them. The newscaster entered every time a TV was turned on and walked around the audience, speaking his reports directly to them. The staging was minimalistic; the scene changes undertaken by the cast made use of strongly choreographed physical theatre technique, which help to create a threatening atmosphere as well as keeping the piece flowing.

Sabrina Mahfouz's adaptation updates the play and is close to the original novel. One review commented that one of the strengths of this adaptation was *'Mahfouz's ear for contemporary speech [which] captures the propulsive rhythm of being a teenager'*. This production made potent use of imagery, e.g. the protests when Callum attends Heathcliffe school are reminiscent of scenes in America during the 1960s, the overdose of a wealthy Cross is breathlessly reported

on multiple TV screens unlike the death of a nought, etc. The staging was more elaborate than the RSC's version, with technical elements and multimedia used to great effect. Although on the surface it looked similar to our world, with teenagers on their mobile phones and dressed in hoodies and baggy trousers, lighting and sound helped to create a very different world. From the lighting that flooded the stage in an eerie red light to a 'doomy haunting soundscape', the whole production had a nightmarish quality that captured the violent and brutal world Callum and Sephy have to navigate.

'Despite a couple of flaws, this is ambitious, thought-provoking stuff, tackling important themes – race relations, class divide, how terrorism comes about, breakdown of family – with intelligence and theatrical flair. It could end up being instrumental in nurturing theatre audiences and practitioners of the future'... (Alun Hood, What's On Stage, 2019)

Tasks

With a partner choose one extract from the play and answer the following questions:

- Explain your production concept, e.g. your design and overall vision of the play, based on an interpretation of the script, e.g. where it is set.
- Explain what type of stage you have chosen.
- Explain your choice of set, props, lighting, sound and costume.
- Explain how your concept will influence how you will portray the characters.

USEFUL RESOURCES

Pilot Theatre resources:

https://www.pilot-theatre.com/media/files/Education%20Packs/NC_EducationPack_Version2.pdf

<https://www.pilot-theatre.com/present-work/educational-resources>

RSC teacher pack:

https://cdn2.rsc.org.uk/sitefinity/education-pdfs/teacher-packs/edu-noughtsandcrosses-teacherpack-2007.pdf?sfvrsn=60712221_2

BBC Noughts + Crosses trailer:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xTEJ4KJh4Ug>

Pilot Theatre trailer:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ujvhJ8z8zAA>

Acknowledgements

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