

Educational Material for the play *DUMB SHOW*

- a play by Joe Penhall

How to use the educational material:

- If you are just going to *see* the play, you can work on part 1 and part 3.
- If you are going to *study* the play in detail, the assignments in part 2 will be relevant as well. Here it is possible to analyse different scenes from the play.
- If you have questions or comments, you are welcome to contact us.
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Introduction

About the Play

Dumb Show is written by Joe Penhall. It was published in 2004.
Joe Penhall is an English-Australian playwright.

Genre: comedy

Meet the director, Barry McKenna: Introduction to the play: Link
[meet the director](#)

Note down the keywords.

Meet the actor, Ian Burns: Introduction to the play: Link
Video [Meet the actor](#)

Introduction to the plot:

When Barry, a famous comedian and TV celebrity, is introduced to personal wealth managers Jane and John, he can't wait for their advice about how to get rich quickly. Opening to them, he willingly shares his views and details of his personal life. But soon he discovers he might become the victim of ruthless tabloid journalism in search of a sensational story. A tense game of power and manipulation follows.

Meet the playwright: Listen to the interview: [link](#)



Penhall:

Describe Penhall's background.

Part 1

Opening the play

Look at the poster. Describe it in your own words.

Notice the words written on the poster: *DUMB SHOW* is about **Fame**, **Betrayal** and **Greed**.

Write down all the associations you get in connection with each of the 3 words:

Fame:

Betrayal:

Greed:

- Share your thoughts about these 3 words in pairs.



Characters:

You will meet 3 characters:

Barry

Liz who introduces herself as Jane

Greg: who introduces himself as John

Setting: It is set in a five-star hotel room

Title: *Dumb Show*.

Definition:

Dumbshow is defined by the Oxford Dictionary of English as “gestures used to convey a meaning or message without speech; mime.” In theatre the word refers to a piece of dramatic mime in general, or more particularly a piece of action given in mime within a play “to summarise, supplement, or comment on the main action”.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dumbshow>

Opening dialogue:

In groups of 3 try this opening dialogue:

Barry: Barry. How are you doing?

Liz: Hi, I'm Jane...

Greg: John....

Barry: Jane. John...

Greg: Jane. Barry...

Kiz: Barry. John. Hi..

Greg: Excellent.

Barry and Liz shake hands.

Barry: Cor, that's a good handshake. She's got a grip like a boa constrictor.

Liz: Oh, I'm a weakling really...

Barry and Greg shake hands.

Barry: Hello. you're not a mason. There was nothing funny about your handshake. That was the classic chop from the top. That was a classic money handshake (does it.) "I'm going to dominate you and take all your money." And this is showbiz handshake. (does it.) "You're not paying for this, you want my soul, leave me alone."

Greg: Very witty.

Liz: You must be tired.

Greg: Give that man a drink.

DUMB SHOW is about Fame, Betrayal and Greed. Consider the following question:

- Which of the 3 words “Fame, Betrayal, Greed” can you use about the opening dialogue?

On the floor:

Exercise 1: Do the handshake.

- 1) the classic
- 2) showbiz handshake
- 3) weak handshake

Exercise 2:

Pair work: Share a joke with your partner.

Exercise 3:

A joke from the play: Read it aloud:

A drunk sees a genie in a bottle of brandy and the genie says, “I’ll give you three wishes...” And the drunk has a drink and he looks at the bottle and he goes - “I want a bottle that never empties...and the genie wave his magic wand and “poof” and there it is...bottle that never empties...The drunk drinks it down ...it fills up again,,and the genie says - “You’ve got another two wishes left...”Hold on, and the drunk says, “I’ll have another two of these.”

More about humour theory in part 3

Part 2 Analysis of different scenes

Questions for the play:

Scene 1

How is the setting established? What are told about where we are and who the characters are, and what are we shown more indirectly?

How do Liz and Greg try to gain Barry's confidence? Give examples from scene 1.

Do you believe them when they say they are big fans of his? Why/why not?(p.3)

Look at the following lines (p.6):

"I can remember when heart attacks were funny. In the seventies. Big sight gag. Until Tommy Cooper croaked on live television. Drunks used to be a scream - until Boris Johnson was elected - and began governing like one. The Irish: We used to laugh at Irishmen. Now they laugh at us. Jokes about religion stopped being funny after Nine/Eleven - jokes about fat people stop being funny after 7/Elevens and McDonald's. We're running out of things to laugh at, so now we laugh at things which aren't even funny, just to feel normal. We're living in a world of hollow laughter and forgive me for not joining in but quite frankly I preferred the real thing."

What does he mean by the idea that we live in a world of "*hollow laughter*"? And what is "*the real thing*" that Barry preferred?

Do you find that humour has a hard time nowadays because reality itself seems to be as absurd as the jokes?

Do Liz and Greg really find Barry's jokes and wisecracks funny? Find evidence in the text on pages 4-5.

How would you describe the type of humour Barry uses? Do you find it funny? Who do you think would laugh at this type of jokes

What does it say about Barry that he doesn't find the joke about the drunk funny (p.9)?

Does this give you a better or a worse impression of Barry?

Comment on Barry's lines at the bottom of p.9 + top of p.10:

Greg describes Barry as being "at the top of his game (p.10). Do you see him as being at the top? Why/why not?

Comment on the conversation about the champagne cork p.7.

"Liz massages the cork.

Greg: That's right, massage the cork.

Liz: It's quite hard.

Greg: I'm quite hard now. Eh? now we're talking."

Why do you think Barry refuses champagne? Does this affect our understanding of how he reacts to the drunken Irishman joke?

Summing up scene 1: What do we know so far? Who are the protagonists and antagonists respectfully, and how do we see this in the scene? Give examples of foreshadowing in the scene.

Scene 2

Opening the scene:

In this scene there are a number of jokes, especially jokes that rely on wordplay. Understanding wordplay is a significant part of understanding language. Browse through the scene and find as many examples of wordplay as possible, and explain the meaning of these jokes.

Why do you think Barry describes the difference between cats and dogs pp.13-14?

In pairs, discuss the following:

How would you define a joke? Create your own definition and discuss with your partner
Do you agree with Barry's claim that "The whole point about jokes is they're just jokes (p.14)?"

Or do you believe that there should be an element of truth in a joke?

Why is the joke about the horse with the long face funny?

Describe Barry's state of mind in this scene. Do you sympathise with him? What do you make of his less attractive sides as they reveal themselves?

What is Barry's explanation for needing to drink? (pp.21-22). Do you agree with him? Is this just drunken rambling, or does he have a point?

Comment on Barry and Liz's use of the three terms confessional, cathartic and addictive (p.23).

Describe the ending of scene 2. What happens between the characters?

Summing up scene 2:

What are the main themes in this scene? Sexual harassment? Existential crisis? Is one an excuse for the other?

Scene 3:

Look at the first two pages of the scene. How have Liz and Greg set Barry up? Does he deserve it? Describe ways in which he has fallen into their trap. What do you think will happen next?

Comment on these lines by Barry (p.26). What does his use of language say about his character? Does he live up to his self-perception?

"I am an expert craftsman of the witty bon mot and a master philosopher. I'm a smooth-talking, fast-walking, fire-stoking, heavy-smoking, straight-shooting, heavy-hitting, side-splitting motherfucking hunka-hunka ramalama ding-dong, baby. And I can dance. *(He does a little tap dance.)* A voice like syrup of figs. I'm what they used to call a triple threat".

DRAMATIC IRONY

According to Encyclopedia Britannica, dramatic irony is "a literary device by which the audience's or reader's understanding of events or individuals in a work surpasses that of its characters." In other words, it occurs when the audience knows more about the situation than the character(s).

Explain the use of dramatic irony in the following lines from the play (p.27). See if you can find other examples in the text.

Barry Tell me, what is the thing, John? Because do you know something? Sad to say, I have a better relationship with you people than I do with my own wife these days. Eh? Doing this makes me feel useful. Doing this makes me feel ... real.

Dramatic irony is a common literary device in plays. You might recognise it if you have read a Shakespeare play. Can you think of other examples of dramatic irony in plays, books or films that you have come across?

Explain briefly how Barry has been set up by Greg and Liz. Look at pages 27-31 to find a list of things they can use against him.

Consider their moral values. Barry might not come across as an innocent man, but are they justified in what they do?

See if you can think of corresponding examples of famous people who have been framed by the media and consider what is their own fault, and what is entrapment.

On page 34, Barry is essentially given two options:

Greg OK. Let's just park that to one side for a minute. OK. Simmer down now. Because the thing is, see, whether we do this now or not, Barry ... are you listening? ... sooner or later, somebody is going to run this and, you see, if somebody else gets hold of this ... one of the other more downmarket publications ... the shock monkeys ... you know what they'll write about you, don't you? Family man. Big TV star. Not a very nice person. Mm.

Pause. Barry stares.

Or ... you see, with your 'Full Cooperation', I would run a, a, a 'Heartfelt Confession'. You could, you know, just chat to us. Talk about what you're going through. The highs and lows. The mistakes you've made. Eh? All the *emotion*. Talk about your beliefs and feelings. Because a lot of people might be interested to know that behind all the clowning, there's a, you know, there's actually a bit of a, a, a 'dark side'. Eh? A few, you know, 'demons', as they say. Do you follow what I'm trying to say?

What are his two options?

What would you do in his situation?

Considering what you know about him so far, what do you think he will do?

On p. 36, we are informed by Liz that "I quite like him really"

Later on, Greg responds:

No. You see, that's what happens when you meet famous people. You think you know them. You think you like them. You sometimes think they're tremendously wise. It's all bullshit. They're fakes. They are, by definition, unknowable and unlikeable - you just can't tell because you don't know them. He's a fucking 'entertainer'. He tells 'good jokes'. He can sing and dance a bit. Big deal. They're not important, these people. They're not special. They're pariahs. Fame is a cancer. It's a cancer! It's a plague. And it's fucking everywhere. And it's destroying us. And so, you see, it's our responsibility to, you know, just, take him down a peg or two. Eh? Because if we don't ... yeah? ... nobody else will. (pp.36-37).

Look at this definition of famous people. Do you agree with Greg's view? Is fame a cancer? Discuss with a partner.

This scene ends with a dramatic incident:

Barry (*grabbing her*) Take your dress off -

Greg What the fuck - ?

Liz You'll rip my - don't you touch me - GET OFF ME - GET HIM OFF OF ME!

Barry stops. *They all stare at each other.*

Blackout

Sum up what has happened in act 1, scene 3.

What do you think will happen following this scene?

Jot down a few ideas and as you read, see if you were on the right track.

Act Two

Scene 1

Look at the following lines (p.40):

Greg OK, well, OK, you see, the point is, you're a pretty morally bankrupt person ...

Barry This is ridiculous . .

Greg ... and nobody even realises. And it's time that they did. It's time people knew who you really are, Barry.

Barry Why?

Greg Don't you think people have a right to know about you?

What do you think? Do we have a right to know how famous people *really* are?

On p. 42, Greg and Barry have the following dialogue:

Greg You're a hypocrite.

Barry It takes one to know one.

Find examples in the play of Greg being a hypocrite.

Comment on the following lines:

Lizsome of the things you said about your fans ... you said they were 'obese', and 'spotty', you said that some of them had been 'lobotomized' ... that's quite *cruel*, isn't it?

Do you consider it important that famous people should actually like their fans? Or is that irrelevant?

Consider the following line (p49):

Barry OK, well, anyway I think I'd like to just call my legal representative now please ... This could be considered a turning point in the play. Take notes of how and why as you read the rest of the scene. How does he turn the scales on Liz and Greg?

Consider what we learn about Barry's wife p. 50-52. Does this change your perception of him?

Tragedy or comedy? Look at the following lines (p. 51):

Greg And now she's having all these problems, health prob — no, don't laugh, this is what happens as you get older ...

Liz Oh please.

Greg It's really sad ...

Liz Yes. 'Sad.' Excellent ...

Greg ... It really is, it's a, it's tragic ... I mean ...

Liz 'Tragic', good. I like that ... (God, look at my hair.)

Tragic heroes typically have heroic traits that earn them the sympathy of the audience, but also have flaws or make mistakes that ultimately lead to their own downfall.

A comic figure is a humorous character that is designed to amuse or entertain. Such characters are included in a play for entertainment purposes.

By these definitions, do you see Barry as *primarily* a tragic or a comic character? Can he be seen as predominantly one and partly the other? If so, please explain why. Use the above lines for inspiration and find other examples from act two, scene 1.

On p.52 and elsewhere, we witness Liz removing her disguise. What is the symbolic significance of this? Relate to one of the following themes:

- Fake versus real
- Entrapment
- showbiz

Consider the following remark on p. 55

Barry OK. So, Here's the situation

How does Barry change things around so that he can benefit from the circumstances? Find details on pages 55-56

Look at the following lines (p.56)

Liz Why didn't she, OK, then, why didn't she tell us ... ?

Barry BECAUSE IT'S PRIVATE! DON'T YOU UNDERSTAND? IT'S PRIVATE! IT'S PRIVATE! YOU STUPID BITCH — JESUS! *(Pause.)* Tell me something. Does it bother you being so dumb? Because that's, you see, I think that's the problem here. The trouble is that you have no imagination ... you have zero imagination ... and so humanity is a mystery to you ... the stink of your own spleen and bile — the pain you inflict — is a mystery to you ... you people ... I don't think you know what you do. I don't think you know what you do. And that's a very frightening thing. *(Pause.)* Is my life worth so little? Is my life worth so little now that unless I'm in the paper, making a fool of myself, I'm, what, no good to anyone anymore?

How have things developed? Does he have a point? Do you believe that celebrities have the right to privacy? Discuss where the limits should go between the private and public side of celebrities.

Find examples of famous people whose privacy has been jeopardized. Are there examples where exposure has had a positive outcome? Are there examples of the opposite?

Look at the final page of this scene and the conversation between Liz and Greg. What are the possible outcomes for these characters? Given the way Greg has acted earlier on in the play, what is ironic about his reaction to the situation?

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jimmy_Savile

Act 2, scene 2

Take a look at the first page of the scene. How has Barry's appearance changed? What do we learn about his private life? What symbolic significance can the fact that Liz gives him a banana have?

Comment on the following lines (p.59):

Liz Thanks for meeting me. *(Pause.)* It's very kind of you. *(Pause.)* After all the ... you know ... *(Pause.)* Greg lost his job. *(Pause.)* I got a pay rise ... *(Pause.)* I bought a car. A Mini. *(Mimes 'driving'.)* Are you all right?

What do you think Liz has done to cope with the situation? What does this say about her moral character?

Why do you think Barry has stopped drinking?

We learn that the reason for Liz meeting with Barry is to get one more story out of him:

Liz (*wipes*) (I got it.)

Silence.

I was only going to say — you know — if you don't mind me saying — I'm sorry but I really have to say this — I think it's a very special story and what's more a, a very moving story and I would like very much if you could find it in yourself to allow me to share, to *share* this very *private* story ...

Barry Share it with who?

Liz With everybody.

What does this say about her character?

How does Barry respond? Look at his final remark in the play and comment on what that says about his character.

Sum up the final scene. What has happened and what is the situation at the end of the play?

Part 3

Additional material

This part has 4 different sections:

- 1) Humour theory - what makes something funny?
- 2) Celebrities
- 3) Inspirational Music
- 4) Review of the play

1) Humour Theory- What makes something funny?

Watch the following introduction to humour: [Philosophy of Humour](#)

Assignment:

Discuss the way humour is used in the play.

Find examples of the different types of jokes.

Use terms from the following section "What Makes a Joke Funny?"

What Makes a Joke Funny?

Several elements contribute to the **funniness** of a joke:

1. **Incongruity**
 - The punchline defies expectations or logic in a surprising way.
 - Example: "Why don't scientists trust atoms? Because they make up everything."
2. **Timing**
 - Good delivery enhances the humor. A joke told at the wrong moment can fall flat.
3. **Relatability**
 - Jokes that connect with shared experiences or cultural norms often resonate more.
4. **Exaggeration**
 - Amplifying traits or situations to absurd levels can create humor.
5. **Wordplay / Puns**
 - Clever manipulation of language or double meanings.
6. **Shock or Taboo**
 - Some jokes get laughs by crossing social boundaries (though they can also offend).

7. Brevity

- The best jokes are usually concise and punchy.
-

Categories of Jokes:

1. One-liners

- Short and witty.
- Example: "I told my wife she was drawing her eyebrows too high. She looked surprised."

2. Puns / Wordplay

- Based on double meanings or phonetic similarities.
- Example: "I used to be a banker but I lost interest."

3. Knock-knock Jokes

- A call-and-response format often used for children.
- Example:
 - Knock knock.
 - Who's there?
 - Lettuce.
 - Lettuce who?
 - Lettuce in, it's cold out here!

4. Dark Humor / Gallows Humor

- Jokes about serious, morbid, or taboo topics.
- Often not for everyone.

5. Observational Jokes

- Focused on everyday life or human behavior.
- Example: "Have you ever noticed how people who type 'LOL' are rarely laughing?"

6. Anecdotal Jokes / Story Jokes

- Based on a short story with a humorous twist at the end.

7. Satire / Parody

- Jokes that mock or criticize individuals, institutions, or societal trends.

8. Anti-jokes

- Deliberately subvert expectations by being humorless or literal.
- Example: "Why did the chicken cross the road? Because it was going to the other side."

9. Riddles

- A puzzle-like joke with a clever or funny answer.

2. Celebrities in Britain:

Research:

In the play you meet the celebrity Barry.

Assignment:

Research one of the following British celebrities, Jimmy Saville [Jimmy Saville](#) or Michael Barrymore [Michael Barrymore](#).

Prepare a presentation on his life and his story and discuss the role of the media.

Consider differences and similarities between Barry from the play and Jimmy Saville or Michael Barrymore.

3. Inspirational music

Assignment:

Listen to one of the following pieces of music and discuss your associations of the music in relation to the play combined with the title.

- Kabalevski: Clowns opus 39 no. 20 [Clowns opus](#)
- Charlie's Dance Alfred Newman and Charlie Chaplin [Charlie's Dance](#)
- Sunday Papers: [Sunday Papers](#)
- Smokey Robinson: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=51B550Qysj8>

4. Review of the play:

Read the following review of the play from a production in London:

Link: [Theatre Review](#)

Assignment:

Write your own review of the play after seeing the production in Krudttønden.

Send your review to Ian Burns from ThatTheatre: pr@that-theatre.com

