

# *The Slab Boys*

## *by John Byrne*

Teaching Notes for Higher English  
*Morna Fleming*

### Synopsis of the play

*The Slab Boys* is set in the Slab Room of A. F. Stobo & Co. Carpet Manufacturers. The story focuses on the everyday and extraordinary trials of a group of adolescents, and is based to some extent on the life of John Byrne. The play is set in 1957, the year Byrne worked in Stoddard's carpet factory as a Slab Boy, and the year he applied to Glasgow Art School. In 1958 he was accepted to the Art School, unlike the character Phil McCann, whose application was refused.

The structure of the play is quite simple. It covers the working Friday, with Act One late morning to lunchtime and Act Two the afternoon to finishing time. In Act One, we are introduced to all the characters, who interact in a number of scenes: the boss Willie Curry berates the three Slab Boys – Phil, Spanky and Hector – for their laziness, and designer Jack Hogg introduces Alan Downie as a temporary worker. We hear about Phil's mother's latest escapade. Sadie the tea-lady arrives with her trolley and sells Hector a double ticket for the Staff Dance. We meet Lucille, 'the Slab Boys' dream', and Phil and Spanky decide to help 're-design' Hector so Lucille will go to the dance with him. Alan finds Phil's art college portfolio and inadvertently lets Curry see it. There is the first real row between Phil and Spanky, and the lunch hooter goes.

Act Two opens after the lunchbreak, with Phil and Spanky reacting histrionically (and clearly greatly exaggeratedly) to the horrors of the canteen. Much of the same happens in this act, in terms of the Phil and Spanky double act, Willie Curry's wartime comparisons and the Slab Boys' abuse of Jack Hogg and Alan Downie, but this time there is more bite. The language is stronger, there is considerably more swearing, and the set-pieces have a much harder edge. Phil's and Hector's pay packets are missing. Hector's 'restyling' results in real damage both to him and his clothes. Lucille is terrified by the sight of Hector looming at her through the window and then out of a cupboard, and Sadie takes out her frustrations and bad feet on Phil, giving him a hard slap on the head for his cheek. There's a message to say that Phil's mum has escaped from the hospital and is on the run. Perhaps inevitably, Phil does not get into art college, and he is actually sacked from the carpet factory. The only really bright note is that Hector is promoted to a designer's desk, while Spanky is told that if he knuckles down he might get a similar promotion in about eighteen months. Alan ends up going to the staff dance with Lucille, where they will all meet in the second play of the trilogy, *Cuttin' a Rug*. In a visual echo of a verbal account in Act One, Phil exits on a cartwheel and the immortal line:

Giotto used to be a Slab Boy, Spanks!

**RANGE:**

- Higher English

**KEY TEXTS:**

- John Byrne, *The Slab Boys Trilogy* (Faber, 2003)

***The Slab Boys* – themes**

- Relationships – Phil and Spanky; Mr Curry and the Slab Boys; Jack Hogg and the Slab Boys; Jack Hogg and Alan Downie; the Slab Boys and Lucille; Sadie, Hector and Alan
- Aspiration – dreams of a better life; dreams of a romantic relationship; willingness to work towards future
- Work – boredom, lack of opportunity, unfairness of treatment, attitudes towards work
- Leadership – Jack Hogg, Mr Curry
- Mental health – Phil’s mother

**Features of drama**

- Characterisation – the construction and development of the characters’ personalities and identities
- Structure – division of the action into acts and scenes
- Setting – where it is set – city/town, building, room(s); when it is set – century/ date, season, day of the week, time of day (Classical structure – there is one location, and the action takes place in one day – unified time and place.)
- Plot – the storyline, the narrative (what happens)
- Conflict – between two characters – what drives the action forward. Based on opposing values and beliefs
- Climax – where the crisis is reached – the most important part of the action – the highest point of conflict

***Dramatis Personae* (from Byrne’s descriptions)**

Phil McCann: A Slab Boy. Nineteen. Working class, from Ferguslie Park.

George ‘Spanky’ Farrell: A Slab Boy. Nineteen. From the same background as Phil.

Hector McKenzie: A Slab Boy. Nineteen, but small for his age.

Jack Hogg: A Designer. Early twenties. Very bad skin and hand-crafted lumber jackets.

Lucille Bentley: A Sketcher. Every Slab Boy’s Dream.

Alan Downie: A new boy.

Willie Curry: The Gaffer. Scourge of the Slab Room. Mid-fifties.

Sadie: The tea-lady. Middle-aged. Bad feet.

For presentation in to a class of twenty-first-century students, some preparation should be done in order that the play can be situated geographically, historically and socially.

Wikipedia and other online resources give a monthly digest of events per year, and a series of DVDs dealing with the music and the main news events from each year from 1950 onwards is available, which could be a valuable background resource for individual and group study. There are very specific references to the pop songs and films and film stars of the period which are integral to the plot and show the differences between the characters.

**Character interaction**

The relationship between Phil and Spanky is central. It is the most important – they are the two who speak most, are on stage most of the time, they act as a double act against the others. They are best friends, like brothers, coming from the same background, sharing a life history. They finish each other’s sentences – they think alike. They gain confidence, trust, solidarity from their relationship.

The following tasks could be allocated to groups within the class, and each group to report back to the whole class, referencing appropriate quotations which can be used in critical writing:

- Phil and Spanky are the centre of the play, and their relationship governs all others. Pages 13–20 and 32–40 show Phil and Spanky with Hector. Look at the type of language they use to and about him, and any aspects of their treatment of him that strike you as important. Is there anything in Hector which makes this treatment more likely or even inevitable, or is it a function of the personalities of Phil and Spanky? Can you differentiate between Phil’s and Spanky’s treatment of Hector? Does this suggest anything to you?

- Look in detail at pages 16–24, and examine the way Phil and Spanky treat Alan. Look at the type of language they use to and about him, and any aspects of their treatment of him that strike you as important. Is there anything about Alan which makes this treatment more likely or even inevitable? Does this tell you something about Alan or about Phil and Spanky?
  - Look in detail at pages 41–44 and examine the relationship between Alan and Hector. What is it that draws them together? Or, rather, are they pushed together as a defence mechanism? What do Alan and Hector have in common which would explain this growing relationship?
  - Look in detail at pages 13–15 and 23–24, and examine the relationship between Phil and Spanky and Jack Hogg. How would you characterise this relationship in a few words? Why do you think there is such animosity among the three of them? Is there any justification for it? If you were to apportion blame, where would you apply it? (You may consider they are all equally at fault, of course.)
  - Look in detail at pages 26–29 and 46–47, and examine the relationship between Phil and Spanky and Mr Curry. Given that Mr Curry is effectively the Slab Boys' boss, is this relationship the one you would expect? What is it in Mr Curry's personality that makes Phil and Spanky's reaction understandable?
  - Look in detail at pages 31–35 and examine the relationship between Phil and Spanky and Sadie. Do you find that this scene illuminates your ideas about the Slab Boys' attitudes and about the way other people relate to them? In what way? Make a note of a number of quotations which best illustrate your findings. Look in detail at pages 34–36 and examine the relationship between Sadie and Alan. How does her treatment of him differ from her treatment of the Slab Boys? What does this tell you about her attitudes? How does Alan respond to her behaviour?
  - Look in detail at pages 39–41 and examine the relationship between Phil and Spanky and Lucille. How does Lucille relate to Alan?
- When you move on to Act Two of the play, you will be able to see how these relationships develop and how, even in a short space of time, matters escalate to create different reasons for conflict between and among the characters.
- The language of *The Slab Boys***
- The language of *The Slab Boys* is very distinctive, but is it distinctively Scottish, or West-coast Scottish, or working-class generally? Is it realistic, given the situation and the setting? Is Byrne making a statement about language on stage by writing like this, or do you think he simply wants the whole situation to be as realistic as possible, and this is how real people speak?
  - How do the 'set pieces' in different dictions function within the dialogue of the play? (Look at pages 16, 20–21, 24–25, for instance.) What does this tell you about the relationship between Phil and Spanky?
  - Is there anything about the language which makes you uncomfortable? Why is this, and is it a fault of the writing or a function of the unfamiliarity of this kind of language in a classroom situation? Should this kind of play be studied in class? If not, why not?
- How does the language change and develop in Act Two? You will find there is rather more swearing, even from Alan, and more inclination to tell home truths than in Act One. How does this affect the development of the plot and interaction of the characters?
- The humour of *The Slab Boys***
- The language contributes hugely to the humour of the play, but there are a number of different types of humour apart from the verbal. Find a number of examples of each of the following types:
- Use of colourful colloquial language both to shock and to provide realistic 'patter' (e.g. pages 31–32, 58–59)

- schoolboy (juvenile) humour in different linguistic modes (e.g. pages 16–17, 26–27, 43–44)
- visual humour, including slapstick (e.g. pages 33–34, 45–47, 53–54, 61–62)
- traditional humour, such as double entendres, misunderstandings, farce

To what extent has the passage of time made some of the humour relatively unintelligible (if indeed it has)? Does this matter when you are reading, or preferably watching the play? When looking at Act Two, examine the way the humour darkens, and becomes more dangerous at times. What is the effect of this?

Students should consider the role of serious issues in a comic play. This could equally be turned to the appropriateness of the comic scenes in Shakespearean tragedy, for instance. In this way, Byrne's play could be considered alongside the other examples of dramatic writing the students have encountered during their previous years at school.

### Women in *The Slab Boys*

According to what you have read so far, what appears to be the role of women in the world of *The Slab Boys*? Look at the models offered: Phil's mum (pages 27–29); Sadie (pages 34–38); Lucille (pages 40–42); the unseen but frequently referenced Miss Walkinshaw and Miss McDonald. How would you characterise these women? Are they a) generalised, b) stereotyped, c) time-locked? d) etc. What kind of woman does not appear at all?

Look at the question of dominance in male-female relationships as depicted. Who holds the upper hand? Is this realistic, or do you see this as a) a function of the realistic setting in time and place, or b) a stereotypical, Sunday Post-type picture (think of the female characters in *The Broons*)?

Once again, matters change in Act Two, when the women who appear (Lucille and Sadie) become more dominant in their own right. Look at the scenes where they appear to find evidence of this.

*The Slab Boys* is an ideal play to study in the classroom, as the themes, issues, characters, plot and setting will fit readily into any of the questions which are set in the examination paper. Analyse the following extracts, commenting in detail on the language used, and show how this extract relates to the language of the play as a whole (commonality).

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Curry: Godstruth, I don't know ... If I'd had you chaps out in Burma. Diarrhoea? There were men in my platoon fighting the Japanese with dysentery.

Spanky: How did they fire it – from chip baskets? (page 15)

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Phil: Bless my boater, did you catch that, Cherry? A yuletide cadeau for the squirt's mater and blow me if old Quelch ain't went and confiscated the blighter!

Spanky: Christ, Nugent, that's torn it.

Phil: Buck up, Pygmy Minimus ... Cherry and I'll think of something [...] I'll wager that beast, Bunter, had a fat finger in this [...] Yaroo! (page 16)

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Phil: Right, Alec ... this is what we call a sink ... s-i-n-k. Now I don't expect you to pick up all these terms immediately, but you'll soon get the hang of it. And this – (*Grabs Hector*) – is what we cry a Slab Boy.

Spanky: You say it ... 'Slab Boy'.

Phil: Note the keen eye ... the firm set of the jaw ...

Spanky: They're forced up under cucumber frames ...

Phil: Note too the arse hanging out of the trousers ... this last because the Slab Boy, for all he is a special breed ...

Spanky: Trained to a hair ...

Phil: ... is expected to put in a full eight hours sweated labour a fortnight for a few measly shillings ...

Spanky: ... and all the gum crystals he can eat ...

Phil: Hence the firm set of the jaw. Thank you, Mr Farrell.

Spanky: Don't mention it. (pages 18–19)