



National
Theatre
Collection

Benedict Cumberbatch and
Johnny Lee Miller in *Frankenstein*,
courtesy of the National Theatre.



Educational
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Frankenstein: Building Character Through Physicality

Tim Maynes

Grade Level: High School | Time: 90 min

Every great performance begins with a strong framework—and so does every great lesson. The Educational Theatre Association’s **T.H.E.S.P.I.A.N.** lesson plan model provides a flexible structure designed specifically for theatre educators, aligning creative exploration with clear learning outcomes. Each phase guides students through a full arc of engagement: from tuning up their artistic tools to sharing discoveries, celebrating growth, and setting the stage for what comes next.

The framework follows eight steps that mirror the rhythm of the rehearsal process:

T. Tune-Up	Warm-up – prepare minds, bodies, and voices for creative work.
H. Hook	Dramatic entrance – capture attention and spark curiosity.
E. Explore	Main activity – engage students deeply in hands-on theatre learning.
S. Share	Reflection – reflect on discoveries and connect learning to life.
P. Practice	Extension activity – reinforce skills through continued exploration.
I. Inspire	Beyond the stage – encourage artistic engagement outside class.
A. Applaud	Celebrate learning – recognize effort, growth, and ensemble spirit.
N. Next Scene	Looking ahead – build anticipation for what’s to come.

This model supports teachers in creating lessons that honor the ensemble process, encourage reflection, and inspire ongoing curiosity. Whether used as-is or adapted to fit your classroom, the **T.H.E.S.P.I.A.N.** framework helps transform every day of learning into a meaningful act of theatre.

The Learning Center

Your go-to library for theatre classroom resources. The EdTA Learning Center houses an expanding catalogue of classroom resources and student-ready materials, with new lessons, activities, tools, and professional development opportunities added regularly as the platform grows. It helps theatre educators bring meaningful, standards-aligned learning to life. Visit learn.schooltheatre.org today!

About This Lesson

Lesson Framework

In the [National Theatre](#) production of *Frankenstein*, Benedict Cumberbatch and Jonny Lee Miller alternate the roles of Victor Frankenstein and the Creature. In this lesson, students compare both actors' performances of the Creature's first moments onstage, looking closely at how physical choices create different interpretations of the same character. Students then revisit the Creature later in his development to consider how an actor can show growth while maintaining a consistent physical character, before applying these ideas to physical character work of their own.

Learning Outcomes

Students will:

- Identify specific physical choices actors use to communicate character.
- Compare how two actors use physicality to create different interpretations of the same character.
- Analyze how an actor adjusts physical choices to communicate character development while maintaining continuity.
- Create and revise a physical performance using intentional choices to communicate character and change.

2014 National Core Theatre Standards

- TH:Cr3.1.HSI.b — Creating: Explore physical, vocal, and physiological choices to develop a performance that is believable, authentic, and relevant to a drama/theatre work.
- TH:Pr4.1.HSI.b — Performing: Shape character choices using given circumstances in a drama/theatre work.
- TH:Pr5.1.HSI.a — Performing: Practice various acting techniques to expand skills in a rehearsal or drama/theatre performance.
- TH:Re7.1.HSI.a — Responding: Respond to what is seen, felt, and heard in a drama/theatre work to develop criteria for artistic choices.
- TH:Re8.1.HSI.a — Responding: Analyze and compare artistic choices developed from personal experiences in multiple drama/theatre works.

Frankenstein: Building Character Through Physicality

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Materials required for instruction (include downloads):

- ☐ Access to both [National Theatre](#) recordings of *Frankenstein*
- ☐ Screen and speakers
- ☐ Chart paper or board
- ☐ Open space for student movement
- ☐ Physical Choices Observation Guide (provided)

Tune-Up (*Warm-Up*)

- 1. Clear enough space for students to move safely around the room. Ask students to begin walking naturally through the space. Encourage them to notice their normal movement without trying to create a character.**

Introduce the following prompts one at a time, allowing students time to explore each before moving on:

- Shift your center of gravity. Let that shift affect the rest of your body.
- Let one part of your body carry more tension than the rest.
- Imagine you are not completely sure your legs will support your weight.
- Imagine the floor has become difficult to move across.
- Imagine something is pulling one part of your body toward the floor while the rest of you tries to keep moving.
- Move as though you are trying not to disturb anything around you.
- Move as though getting across the room is suddenly urgent.



- Imagine your body has just encountered an object it doesn't understand. Explore it physically without deciding the purpose of the object.
- Let one movement you discover happen again. Repeat it several times and notice whether it begins to change.
- Imagine you hear something unfamiliar somewhere in the room. Let your body respond before you move toward or away from it.
- Finally, move through the space as though you are becoming more comfortable in this body and environment. Allow something about your movement to become easier or more certain.

2. Bring students back together and ask: *During that exercise, what were some of the things you changed about your body or movement? What changed about how your body felt as you moved?*

Let students use their own words first. As ideas emerge, help students connect their observations to physical performance vocabulary. For example:

- I moved really slowly. → *Tempo*
- I felt heavy. → *Weight*
- I kept almost falling. → *Balance*
- My shoulders were really tight. → *Tension*
- I kept doing the same thing with my hand. → *Gesture / Repetition*
- I stayed close to the floor. → *Levels*
- I kept looking toward the sound. → *Focus*
- I stayed around the edges of the room. → *Use of Space*

If needed, use another probing reflection question: *What did you notice yourself adjusting in response to the prompts?*

3. As the discussion continues, build a shared vocabulary on the board or chart paper:

Weight, Balance, Tension, Tempo, Gesture, Repetition, Levels, Focus, Use of Space

Then ask students to think back to the exercise: *Which of these did you find yourself changing together? For example, if you changed your weight, did anything happen to your balance, tempo, or tension?*

Optional: Allow a few students to demonstrate connections they noticed.

4. Expand the discussion to make the bridge to character:

- *You were not given a character to play. Did any of the ways you moved start to suggest a character anyway? What made that happen?*
- *What might an audience begin to assume about a character based only on these physical choices?*

They may suggest age, confidence, comfort, curiosity, fear, power, or other qualities. Encourage them to connect those interpretations back to the physical evidence: What specifically about the movement gave you that idea?

5. Explain that actors can intentionally combine these physical tools to help an audience understand who a character is, even before that character says a word. Let the students know they will now use the same vocabulary to examine how two professional actors approach the same character.

Hook (*The Dramatic Entrance*)

1. Explain that in the National Theatre production of *Frankenstein*, Benedict Cumberbatch and Jonny Lee Miller alternated the roles of Victor Frankenstein and the Creature. This gives us a unique opportunity to see two actors make their own choices about the same character.
2. Before viewing, ask students to focus on the actor's body and movement. Using Part 1 of the Physical Choices Observation Guide, have them write down anything they notice about how the actor moves. Remind them that for now, they should only record what they see rather than what they think the Creature is thinking or feeling.
3. Begin by watching the Creature's first moments onstage in one version.

- **Viewing Selection 1:** Creature birth/opening sequence, Version A - The Creature's birth/opening sequence occurs within approximately the first 10 minutes of each recording. Preview the sequence and select a portion from each version that gives students enough material to observe and compare the actors' physical choices. For a 90-minute lesson, approximately 5–7 minutes from each version is recommended; longer excerpts may be used when time allows.

4. Immediately afterward, ask students what they observed. Connect their observations with the physical vocabulary established during the warm-up.

- If students offer an observation such as “He was scared,” “He was confused,” or “He was angry,” ask: *What did you see the actor do that made you think that?*

Continue until students are consistently connecting interpretation to observable physical evidence.

5. Before showing the second version, ask each student to choose three physical elements to watch closely: **Weight, Balance, Tension, Tempo, Gesture, Repetition, Levels, Focus, Use of Space**

6. Show the equivalent birth/opening sequence with the other actor. As they watch, have students use Part 2 of the Physical Choices Observation Guide to focus on the three physical elements they selected. For each element, ask them to record what they observe in this performance and how the actor’s choices compare with what they noticed in Version A. Encourage students to describe specific, observable choices.

- **Viewing Selection 2:** Creature birth/opening sequence, Version B — beginning of production through approximately 10:00. *[Use same clip as the first version]*

7. Once students have identified differences, move to interpretation:

- Where did the actors make noticeably different physical choices?
- What did those choices communicate to you about each version of the Creature?
- Did the two Creatures seem to discover or experience their surroundings differently?
- Did you respond differently to the two performances? What specific acting choice contributed to that response?

Explore (*Main Activity*)

Part 1: A Character Develops

1. Explain that physical characterization does not stay frozen in the character's first moments. As a character learns, experiences new things, and changes, an actor has to communicate that development while still allowing us to recognize the same person.
2. Show a later excerpt in which the Creature experiences snow and continues learning from De Lacey.
 - **Viewing Selection 3:** Snow/De Lacey sequence. In the Jonny Lee Miller version, this scene begins at approximately 25:00; in the Benedict Cumberbatch version it begins at approximately 27:30.

For this viewing, ask students to consider one question: *What has changed physically since the birth scene, and what has stayed the same?*

3. After viewing, discuss:
 - Which movements seem more controlled or intentional now?
 - What does the Creature appear to have learned about using his body?
 - What physical characteristics from the birth sequence can you still recognize?
 - How does the Creature physically respond to something new, such as the snow?
 - How does the actor communicate growth without making the Creature feel like an entirely different character?

Optional: As they share, record student's observations of specific physical evidence in two columns on the board/chart paper: CHANGED and CONTINUED

Note: Students may focus primarily on how the Creature's emotions have changed. Keep bringing the conversation back to the actor's physical craft: *What has changed in the actor's body? What has stayed consistent? What does that choice communicate?*

Part 2: Try It Yourself

1. Tell students that they will now create their own physical interpretation of the Creature. They may draw inspiration from what they observed in the two performances, but should not try to imitate either actor. Their goal is to make intentional physical choices that communicate their own interpretation of the character.
2. Put students in pairs or small groups and give everyone the same circumstance: *Your character encounters something completely unfamiliar for the first time.* The unfamiliar element might be an object, another person, a sound, a texture, or something in the environment.
3. Students will create the character at two different points in time:
 - **First Encounter:** Create a 30–45 second physical sequence showing the Creature encountering the unfamiliar element for the first time. Do not use dialogue. Make at least three intentional choices involving the physical elements (Weight, Balance, Tension, Tempo, Gesture, Repetition, Levels, Focus, Use of Space)
 - **Second Encounter:** Some time has passed and the Creature encounters the same thing again. Create a second 30–45 second sequence that shows what the Creature has learned or how they have changed.
 - **Students should intentionally decide:** What changes? What stays consistent? How will the audience recognize this as the same Creature at a different point in their development?

Share (Reflection)

1. Invite several students or groups to perform their First Encounter and Second Encounter sequences back-to-back.
2. After each performance, ask the audience to begin with observation rather than evaluation. Possible prompts include:
 - What physical choice stood out in the first performance?



- What changed in the second?
 - What stayed consistent?
 - What helped you recognize the same character?
 - Where did you most clearly see development?
 - What specific choice made you interpret the character that way?
- 3. After the audience responds, give the performers an opportunity to share one choice they made intentionally and/or reflect on how their Creature is different from the versions you watched and what physical choices made this interpretation their own.**
 - 4. Conclude by asking:** *How can physical choices show us not only who a character is, but who they are becoming?*

Practice (*Optional Extension Activity*)

- 1. If time allows, show the same snow/De Lacey excerpt from the other actor's version of the production.**
- 2. Ask students to compare this later performance with the actor's birth sequence from earlier in the lesson and consider:**
 - *What physical qualities has this actor carried forward from his version of the Creature at birth?*
 - *What has changed?*
 - *Does this actor communicate the Creature's development in the same way as the other actor?*
 - *Which differences seem like deliberate choices about how this version of the Creature learns and develops?*
- 3. Facilitate a group discussion, starting with a prompt:** *Neither actor can simply repeat the physicality of the birth scene for the entire play. How does each actor allow the character to change while maintaining his own interpretation of the Creature?*

Inspire (*Homework / Beyond the Stage*)

1. Ask students to find a short performance from theatre, film, television, or another recorded performance and watch approximately one minute *with the sound off*.
2. Have students identify three physical choices the actor makes (using the physical elements: **Weight, Balance, Tension, Tempo, Gesture, Repetition, Levels, Focus, or Use of Space**)
3. For each, complete the sentence: *I observed _____, which made me interpret the character as _____.*
 - **Optional Question:** *If you watched this character later in the story, what aspect of their physicality would you pay attention to? What might a change (or lack of change) tell you about the character?*
4. Students can bring their observations to the next class or submit them as a short written reflection.

Applaud (*Celebrate Learning*)

1. After students share their physical sequences, invite the class to offer brief “physical choice shout-outs.” Ask students to name a *specific choice* they saw a classmate make that was clear, creative, or effective. Encourage students to use the vocabulary from the lesson in their responses.

Optional: Have students use the following reflection structures:

- “When you _____, I understood _____.”
- “When you changed _____ but kept _____, I could see that the character had developed but was still the same person.”

Acknowledge students for taking risks, making specific choices, revising their work, and responding thoughtfully to the choices of others.

Next Scene (*Preview / Looking Ahead*)

Consider using any of the following lessons to continue exploration of physicality/characterization:

- Lesson Plan: [Physical Choices](#)
- Lesson Plan: [Playing with Puppetry to Unlock Physicality in Acting](#)
- Lesson Plan: [Move Like You Mean It – Character Walks](#)
- Lesson Plan: [Intro to Status in Characterization](#).

Lesson Wrap-Up

Assessment / Evidence of Learning: Use student discussions, observation notes, performance work, and revision as evidence of learning.

Students demonstrate understanding when they can:

- Identify a specific physical acting choice rather than relying only on a general statement about character or emotion.
- Use evidence from a performance to explain how a physical choice affects their interpretation.
- Compare two different interpretations of the same character with specific observations.
- Identify both change and continuity in an actor's physical characterization as the character develops.
- Make at least three intentional physical choices in their own performance.
- Adjust physical choices between the "First Encounter" and "Second Encounter" sequences while maintaining a recognizable character.

A final reflection can also serve as a quick formative assessment: *Choose one physical choice you made today. What did you want it to communicate, and what did you change as your character developed?*

Name: _____

As you watch, focus first on what the actor does with his body and movement. Record what you can observe before deciding what those choices might communicate about the Creature.

Physical Choice	Look for:
Weight	How heavy or light does the movement appear?
Balance	How steady, centered, or off-balance is the body?
Tension	Where does the body appear tight, rigid, loose, or relaxed?
Tempo	How quickly or slowly does the actor move?
Gesture	What specific movements stand out?
Repetition	What movements happen again? Do they change?
Levels	How does the actor use high, middle, and low positions?
Focus	Where does the actor direct their attention?
Use of Space	How does the actor move through or respond to the space?

First Viewing (Version A): What Do You Notice?

As you watch the first version, focus on the actor's body and movement. Write down anything you notice. You don't need to interpret the choices yet - just record what you see.



**Second Viewing (Version B): What Do You Notice?**

As you watch the second version, choose three physical elements that stood out to you in Version A. You'll use these to focus your observations as you watch.

Physical Element	Version B: What do you observe?	What is different from Version A?

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