

Virgins

by John Retallack

Worksheet notes by Kristina Leitner and Andrew Milne-Skinner

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I. Pre-reading

1. Speculate what the play could be about. Which sort of characters would you expect in a play called *Virgins*?
2. Which expectations do you have concerning the play?
Will the play be funny, boring, interesting, thrilling, informative, enlightening, or...?
3. Define ,virgin'.
4. Are virgins usually seen in a positive or negative light? Why?
5. Talk about how useful the sex education at school has been to you.
6. To what extent do you have an open relationship with your parents when it comes to talking about sex?
7. Different cultures seem to have different attitudes to virginity. In which ways do you think? Find out about such differences. Compare and contrast them.
8. What about Austria? Is it 'in' to be a virgin? Is it a topic that you readily talk about or rather one that you tend to avoid?
9. Do you think that stars can influence popular opinion? For example, Britney Spears once "made a name for herself as a happy, wholesome pop star who was saving herself for marriage". (http://www.usmagazine.com/britney_teaser_draft)
 - "The singer famously said would remain a virgin until she got married, and became an official role model for fans around the world.
Her determination to wait until she married made her a hero for the True Love Waits pro-chastity movement."
(<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/3052143.stm>)
 - Dr. Arthur Cassidy, a psychologist at the Belfast Institute who specialises in teenagers and sexuality, explains that celebrity is a key issue. "There is a media fascination with who celebrities sleep with, and teenager see that as a bible for how to live."(*The Sunday Times Magazine*, March 23, 2008)

II. While-reading

1. What suggests that the family are English middle class?
2. In which sense could the doll's house be symbolic?
3. What makes the atmosphere in the house claustrophobic?
4. How is dance used in the performance of the play?
5. What impression do we get of Zoe from her opening monologue?
6. By contrast, what impression do we get of Jack?
7. "Totally different planet": what is Jack referring to? What does he feel like in such a situation?

8. Describe what Jack's first sexual experience with a girl was like.
9. Why does Zoe like the boy she met at the party?
10. Do you find Zoe's romantic nature simple innocence or calm maturity? What tells you?
11. Description of Zoe's boyfriend: Speculate where he is from. What might his background be?
12. Speculate how he kissed her.
13. What is going wrong between Nick and Suzy? What does each of them want? What is Nick after? Why does Suzy want to be left alone?
14. If you were Jack, would you believe Ben? Why (not)?
15. What do you think of Ben's reaction? What would you advise a friend to do in such a situation? How would you help him/her?
16. Which other problems can you identify in Nick and Suzy's behaviour? (2nd Nick & Suzy exchange)
17. Summarize Nick and Suzy's dialogue in your own words.
18. What does each person want from the other?
19. In a situation like Jack's, whom would you turn to, and for which reasons?
20. Do you think Jack can trust Zoe?
21. Which different expectations of physical contact do Nick and Suzy have?
22. "It's like stroking a dead body": how do you interpret this comment?
23. "Cohesive and loyal unit called family". Find your own definitions of 'family'. Which characteristics do you attribute to 'family'?
24. What would you do in Zoe's situation?
25. Do you think Zoe was fair or even wise to tell her father about Jack? Why (not)?
26. How would **your** parents react when confronted with such a situation?
27. What has Zoe been hoping for when she says, "You said you'd discuss it with him"?
28. What does Nick do rather than actually discuss the problem with Jack?
29. What does Nick want for his son?
30. If you were in Jack's position, would you act in the same way towards Nick? Why (not)?
31. In which way and in which tone of voice does Nick confront Jack?
32. What do you think Jack's body language and tone of voice are like in this first dialogue with his dad? (Scene 2, 4th Sunday) Describe Jack's behaviour in this part of the play. Does he seem to be angry, annoyed, mature, intimidated, docile, or...? Act out Jack's role.
33. Nick doesn't beat Jack physically, but...?
34. How would you feel if your father called you "a waste of time and space"?
35. Do you think Nick is justified in taking back Jack's mobile phone? Why (not)?

36. "Loss of respect": find the corresponding paragraph and discuss whether this comment is even more offensive and hurtful.
37. Which is the climax in this confrontation scene?
38. Which comment by Nick really shocks (and shames? even humiliates?) Jack?
39. Why is Nick so explosive?
40. Were they really having 'a reasonable discussion'? Why (not)?
41. How does Suzy deal with the volatile situation?
42. How does Suzy react to Jack's admission that he has taken cocaine?
43. In which way and in which tone of voice does Jack explain to Suzy what happened?
44. To what extent do you sympathize with Jack? Why (not)?
45. Act out the dialogue between Jack, Suzy and Nick. Consider each person's emotions.
46. List all the different emotions Jack goes through during this particular dialogue.
47. How does Suzy treat her husband when he interrupts her conversation with Jack?
48. In how far is Jack as 'independent' as he claims?
49. How does Suzy assert herself over Nick in this scene?
50. How does Suzy turn on Nick?
51. How does she hold up a critical mirror to Nick?
52. Do you agree that Zoe is 'very mature'? Why (not)?
53. There are a few references to how their household works. Summarize them.
54. Who fulfils which role? Are the characters happy with their respective situations?
55. In how far can Nick cope with his role as 'houseman'?
56. In how far does Nick admit that he can't handle Jack?
57. What did Zoe miss in the 'kitchen conversations' with her mother about sex?
58. What in your opinion is the best way for parents to talk to their teenage kids about sex, alcohol and drugs? How would you like them to approach you on this topic? Do you discuss these issues with your parents? If not, would you, still, like to discuss these issues with them? Why (not)?
59. Have you had an experience like Zoe's? Namely, being lectured on one of these issues?
60. Why won't Jack trust his father again easily?
61. Which mutual recriminations - accusations do Nick and Suzy have concerning their sex life?
62. Normally children have tantrums. Who has them in the play?
63. To what extent do you think Jack's problem is a lack of self-esteem?
64. How do you interpret Suzy's comment: "It may be Sunday but I have some *real* problems to sort out at work"? So are their marital problems not so important to her?
65. With which tone of voice does Nick say: "Oh, don't let me hold you up"?
66. How will Jack react the next time his father shouts at him?

67. Do you have sympathy with Jack when he wants to hit his father (if he is humiliated again)?
68. Do you think Zoe is being honest about not sleeping with 'the man with no name'? Why (not)?
69. Find evidence of peer pressure in the play.
70. Do you agree with Zoe that Ben manipulates Jack? Why (not)?
71. Can you find any trace of 'competition' between Jack and his mates when it comes to sex?
72. What does Zoe condemn in Jack's behaviour?
73. Can you explain the difference between 'eroticism' and 'pornography'? (How does Zoe define the difference between eroticism and sex?)
74. Is Zoe 'special' because she has a romantic idea of her 'first time'?
75. To what extent is Zoe 'ignorant' (of sex), as Jack claims?
76. Talk about her comment: "I respect myself. I'll stay that way as long as I want. I have a choice. Unlike you".
77. What makes Jack jump up and down at the end of scene 3? Which feelings does he have?
78. When Jack insists that he is 'going back to nature', what is he rejecting, do you think?
79. How would you stage the beginning of scene 4 when everybody has fallen out with each other?
80. In which way are the different 'dance' movements of the four family members indicative – and even symbolic?
81. "I'm tame. Tame boy. Everyone please dump on me". What is Jack saying here? How does he get his feelings across?
82. Scene 4: how is Nick characterized by Jack and Suzy?
83. In which sense is Nick 'a monster'?
84. "See, it's you who's come to find me – not him". Did Jack inwardly hope that his Dad would come and find him?
85. Do you agree that Nick is an egoistic tyrant? Why (not)?
86. What might the wood at night represent?
87. In which way does each of the four main figures 'run away from home'?
88. Why does Nick prefer to stay and wait at home?
89. Scene 5: "So you didn't come to any harm then"? What is Nick really alluding to here?
90. In which tone might Zoe reply to Nick: "No. I didn't come to any harm"?
91. From the conversation between Zoe and Nick is it possible to define 'family'?
92. Just how romantic was Nick's first sexual encounter? Describe it.
93. How does Nick see his own sexual history? With pride, with shame, or...?
94. Why does Zoe think Nick is a 'hypocrite'?

95. Why is Zoe so angry with her father in scene 5? What has happened to her?
96. How does Sadie feel in the course of the phone conversation with Jack?
97. How does Sadie feel at the end of the phone call?
98. Why does Zoe think Nick is being condescending, that is, politely 'superior'?
99. How does Zoe act as a confidante to Suzy?
100. What makes Suzy explode? And what does she find difficult?
101. Why is the end of scene 7 so powerful?
102. What's your first impression of Beth?
103. In which tone of voice does Beth address Jack?
104. Why is the song *A Certain Romance* by the Arctic Monkeys suitable for Jack's dance?
105. Scene 9: Why does Jack break out in anger?
106. Why is Jack so bitterly disappointed?
107. How does Nick try to boost Jack's self-confidence? Does it help?
108. In which way is Nick 'completely different' from Jack?
109. Compare Zoe's comments in Scene 10 (the sixth Sunday morning) with hers in Scene 1 (the first one). In which ways are they similar or different?
110. "It seems the more sex that people have, the less they know what to do about it. Perhaps the less you know, the more you see." How do you understand these apparent paradoxes?
111. To what extent do you respect or even admire Zoe? Why (not)?
112. How do you think Jack feels after reading the letter from Sadie? Why?
113. What do you think of the ending? How positive do you find the very end of the play? Could (or should) it have ended differently?
114. What about Suzy's last statement? Is it really as simple as that? Why (not)?
115. In which ways could you call Suzy and Zoe 'emancipated'?

III. Overall Questions

1. In which way is trust a recurrent theme? Follow this theme through the play. Who trusts or does not trust whom, and why?
2. The idea of 'family' runs like a leitmotif through the play. Identify and follow through this theme. In which different ways do the family members talk about 'family'.
3. With which character in the play do you have most empathy, or even sympathy? Explain why.
4. In which ways are the parents' conventional roles reversed?
5. In which way is Zoe the 'goody-goody' daughter?

6. “That’s why everyone gets wrecked. They’re afraid of what they’ll catch. Then they’re so wasted, they catch it anyway” (scene 3). Discuss these ideas critically.
7. What is the purpose of the dance sequences?
8. Identify the various confrontations in the play. Who vs. whom? Over which issue or problem?
9. In which ways is the play about emotional inhibitions? About teenagers’ desire for openness with their parents?
10. Find the most meaningful scene for you in the play, and explain why you have chosen it.

IV. Follow-up Tasks

- A. Draw a sociogram of the family and friends. Show the inter-relationships with arrowed lines and symbols. Use the sociogram symbolically: the vertical dimension might show the different generations and ‘power’, closeness or apartness between characters can be shown spatially; etc.
- B. Draw a structure chart showing the movement of the play, with ups and down, confrontations and turning-points. Mark your chart.
- C. If you were in the situation of one of the characters... : write a stream-of-consciousness diary entry. For example, Jack, after having confronted his dad.
- D. Try and express some of the more difficult situations between the family members through dance (you can use the music suggested in the play). You may want to take a look at the movement tasks below beforehand.
- E. Draw a mind map which shows how the various themes in the play are interrelated. Try putting family at the centre of your mind map, with the other themes branching off from it.

You might like to integrate these points:

- sexuality both for teenagers and their parents; first experiences and sexual frustration
- attitudes towards and understanding of sex and pleasure
- integrated family vs. fragmented family
- lack of communication
- coming to terms with independence of grown-up children
- alcohol, drugs
- ‘letting free’
- lack of time and commitment to family because of long working hours
- physical closeness
- marital problems
- ...

V. Characterization

- Try and match each of the adjectives in the list to one (or more) of the four characters, namely Nick, Suzy, Jack and Zoe. Explain why you have chosen these adjectives.

abusive	accommodating	adaptable	aggressive	angry	caring
challenging	considerate	cruel	cynical	defeated	defiant
emancipated	envious	explosive	frustrated	good-natured	grown-up
helpless	honest	immature	inconsiderate	independent	insecure
insensitive	ironical	jealous	loving	mature	nervous
offensive	passive	patient	provocative	quiet	rebellious
relaxed	reliable	sarcastic	self-assertive	self-confident	self-
conscious	selfish	sensitive	sincere	sympathetic	tender
timid	thoughtful	trustworthy			

- Then try and put the adjectives in some order of importance for each character concerned.

VI. Discussion Forum

‘Binge’ drinking, taking drugs and teenage pregnancies. Do you think there is a bigger problem in Great Britain than in Austria?

- Look at and discuss the following excerpts (taken from *Company of Angels’ Virgins Resource Pack 2006*).
 - Eight out of 10 teenagers lose their virginity when they are drunk, feeling pressurised into having sex or are not using contraception, a survey has revealed.
 - The research, conducted by the Trust for the Study of Adolescence, will alarm government ministers, who are concerned that the UK has the highest rate of teenage pregnancy in Western Europe and that sexually transmitted infections (STI), such as Chlamydia, are found mainly in those aged 16-19.
 - The survey of 3000 London secondary school pupils aged 15-18 found that:
 - 39 per cent had sex for the first time when one or other partner was not equally willing
 - Almost three in 10 lost their virginity for ‘negative reasons’, such as wanting to please a boyfriend
 - 51 per cent of girls and 37 per cent of boys had had unprotected sex
 - 58 per cent of girls and 39 per cent of boys had slept with someone at least once without using a condom
 - Two in five wish they had waited longer before having sex

- Only 20 per cent who have sex for the first time take precautions are in a steady relationship or feel the timing is right
- Anna Martinez of the Sex Education Forum said. ‘These results show that there’s a lot of ignorance among young people about sex and that too many are becoming involved in high-risk sexual behaviour before they have had a chance to learn about issues such as how to resist pressure from partners, friends and the media to have sex. Schools, parents and professionals are failing young people by not giving them adequate support and information.’

Extracts from Denis Campbell’s article in *The Observer*, May 21, 2006

- In an article published in the *Sunday Times Magazine* (March 23, 2008) – almost two years later than the article above – the situation seems to have changed a little. This article is entitled “What’s love got to do with it? What teenagers know – what their parents don’t want to.”, we have extracted the following parts:
 - There’s no shock factor in sex any more. People are very promiscuous at my age (18). There’s a lot of casual sex now. It’s all become much simpler. Generation YouTube is frighteningly frank, terrifyingly knowledgeable and shockingly experimental in its range of experiences.
 - But if promiscuity is rising, so too is awareness – British teen pregnancies rates (previously the shame of Europe) have fallen by as much as 40% to record lows. Teenagers may now be doing it younger, more frequently and more deviantly, but three-quarters are using protection during first sex.
 - In Britain, the average age that people have sex for the first time is 16. In Northern Ireland the figure is slightly lower at 15,6.
 - One in five young men and nearly half of young women aged 16-24 say they wish they had waited longer to have sex.
 - Good sex education gives young people the knowledge, skills and confidence to delay sex until they are ready to make informed decisions. It also helps them resist pressure and take responsibility for their sexual health when they do become sexually active.
 - Many blame the traditional British awkwardness surrounding sex as the catalyst for their seeming inability to control the sexual appetites of their teens: “Sex education begins in the home, but the British, particularly the middle classes, have this embarrassment regarding sex, “says Kerridge. “There’s this postcard humour, a sense of hiding behind sniggers and euphemisms. I think it’s time we took a more adult approach to sex and really begin to see the impact on our children’s lives.”

- A lot of Christians are growing up and accepting that there are no boundaries in love. Girls get off with other girls: it's no big deal. I've slept with a girl, kissed her and stuff – it was fine. People can be friends and sleep with each other and it won't matter. They'll wake up the next day and go, 'I can't believe I did that,' and it'll just be funny. I get to that stage where I'm really drunk and I want to have sex and we'll do loads of stuff, but I won't actually have sex. We were brought up with this undertone of not having sex with too many boys, but no one ever said don't have oral sex or don't take all your clothes off and do everything else. It's new times; new horizons.”
- In which ways do attitudes to sex among young people in Britain seem to have changed even over the last two years?
- In which ways do British attitudes differ from Austrian attitudes?
- Now go on to do further research on this topic

VII. Sexual Health: What the people “in charge” have to say –

(with due acknowledgement to the Company of Angels for their *Virgins Resource Pack 2006*)

‘Sex education in the UK is poor in comparison to some European countries. In the UK, people generally find it embarrassing to talk openly about sexual matters. Careful history taking is strongly recommended in order that all potentially infected partners are identified and that better support services be made available for those who have to inform a partner(s) as this can be daunting.’

(‘Sexually transmitted Infections’: BMA (British Medical Association) Report: 2002)

‘When adolescents are asked where they wish to get information about sex, parents come high on the list...’

(‘Adolescence; a time of risk-taking’: Robinson etc. in British Medical Journal 2002)

‘Why does a young person, living in an affluent society, surrounded by the multitude of contraceptive options available to us in the 21st century, armed with the knowledge of the adverse consequences of unsafe sex, get pregnant or catch a sexually transmitted disease? What can be done about it? The answer to both is: we don't fully know.’

(‘Adolescence; a time of risk-taking’: Robinson etc. in BMJ 2002)

Sexual Health: Take charge – What do you want to say?

Task 1

Listen to the statements one at a time as they are read out. For each of the statements discuss your initial response/reactions in your group (approx. 4 or 5).

Task 2

Note the responses down on paper or store them in your physical memory. Also note any key comments that you feel are important for other to hear. They could be individual words, phrases or whole sentences.

Observe people's physical responses and non-verbal communication, and select gestures, movements, etc. that display significant emotional responses – e.g. discomfort, outrage, shock, humour...

Task 3 – to be carried out individually, but some participants may need assistance

- a) Write your own poem/short piece of text selecting words or phrases from your group's results from task 2. You can be as free with your writing as you wish; for this task there is no right or wrong way to create your poem/text. Add in your own words if you need to, but ensure that you also select from your group's results.
- b) Once you have written your poem/text, try and create your own short piece of movement, using some of the physical responses you recorded in your group from task 3. As in task a) there is no right or wrong way to create your movement. Add your own movements if you need to.

Task 5 – return to your small group

- a) Experiment with some of the group speaking their poem/text and some of the group doing their movement phrases altogether.
- b) Try different combinations of text and movement; swapping positions; reading someone else's text or learning someone else's movement phrase and doing it with them.

VIII. Suggested Websites related to the Issues raised in *Virgins*

Web Quest

www.playingsafely.co.uk

Click on **Clinic Visit** and follow Gary's storyboard on getting treated...

www.london.gov.uk/young-london/teens/issue-zone/get-healthy

Straightforward information when you just want the facts...

www.hesaysyousay.co.uk

www.thesite.org

Packed full of information...

www.fpa.org.uk

Quick and easy access to the facts and advice...

www.likeitis.org

Try the **Cool or Fool** quiz and test your sexual health knowledge...

www.teenagehealthfreak.com

Eavesdrop on Dr. Ann's virtual surgery and learn from other's mistakes...

www.teenpregnancy.org

Fact sheets and much more...

IX. Reviews of the Play...

- Study these various reviews of the play.
- Which of them do you like best, and why?
- Notice how they are structured and developed.
- When you come to write your own review, consider carefully your own structure and development.

1. Virgins

A typical family Sunday morning, the parents quietly making love on the only day off in the week before the kids are awake. Teenage daughter up and about feeding the cat and turning her brothers alarm off, he always forgets to switch it off but still sleeps through it. Her brother actually lying awake desperately is trying to appear normal despite having had sex for the first time.

This is the interactions of one typical family, the importance of not only talking but of actually listening and trying to understand despite differences and prejudices.

Stefan Butler, Tilly Fortune, Peter Machen and Emily Woodward enact this story using music, dance, and theatre the interactions superb and the 75 minutes pass very quickly.

(www.one4review.com, Aug 10, 2008)

2. Virgins

Not just another teen drama

John Retallack's new play looks at a family of four who hit crisis point when seventeen-year-old Jack-the-lad contracts an STI from a party he can't remember. Without resorting to stereotypes, it deals with the constantly evolving teen/parent bond, exploring the transition to adulthood and the strain it causes in their parents' relationship. The dreaded S-word is inevitably under discussion, delving into the fundamental differences in how men, women and different generations view sex. The piece traverses smoothly between monologues, dialogues and Fleur Darkin's dance based movement, which express emotions where words aren't enough. In the hands of four extremely competent actors and movers this is an unpretentious, surprisingly accurate, gem of a show.

(Greer Ogston, *The List*, Glasgow and Edinburgh Events Guide, Aug 9, 2006)

3. **Virgins**

Company of Angels in association with The Junction, Cambridge/Escalator East to Edinburgh

A realistic and often gritty drama, this performance touches upon modern issues facing families – sex, drugs and marital problems. Each of the characters goes on a journey of discovery about themselves and their family, and learns along the way. The premise may seem trite, but the acting and arguments between the characters keeps it going. There's some exciting physical drama between each scene too, as the characters dance with aggressive motions used to express their emotions. There are some cringe-worthy moments as the parents find out about the children's sexual exploits, although these are often funny. Comedy mileage is also made from the subject of sexually transmitted infection – plus the process of the telling the possible ex-partners that a trip to the clinic may be necessary.

(*Three Weeks*, Aug 17, 2006)

4. **Virgins**

Company of Angels in association with the Junction, Cambridge

Of all the incidents that could possibly bring a family closer together, the discovery of a teenage boy's sexually transmitted infection might not seem likely to make the top ten.

Virgins is about as far as you can get from a patronising Theatre in Education show (or a medically-focused sex education lesson) while still highlighting the depressing realities of teenage sexual behaviour.

Playwright John Retallack has a knack of taking major social issues affecting young people and creating quite outstanding plays that move, entertain and inform, but never preach. With *Virgins*, he proves that his outstanding 2001 production *Hannah and Hanna* was no fluke, and that his *Company of Angels* is one of the country's most important theatre groups.

A wild house party changes the lives of brother and sister Jack and Zoe (a pair of excellent performances by Stefan Butler and Emily Woodward) – she meets her future boyfriend; he gets off his face, has sex on a bathroom floor and wakes up at 6am in the front garden.

The repercussions of this night are nowhere near as straightforward as they seem. While parents Suzy and Nick try to walk the line between discipline and support, their own relationships past and present come under scrutiny.

Nobody, not even holier-than-thou virgin Zoe, emerges unscathed, but for a play about an extremely unpleasant problem, *Virgins* has a touchingly happy and optimistic ending.

It is part of the *Company of Angels* manifesto to introduce young audiences to new experiences at the theatre, and this goes some way to explaining the inclusion of dance in this production. While the script is strong enough that it has no real need for these extra flourishes, the movement sections are nonetheless dynamic and well-performed.

Virgins embarks on a UK tour following the Fringe – in an ideal world, it would visit every secondary school in the country.

(Shona Craven, *OnstageScotland* – Independent arts reviews online, www.onstagescotland.co.uk/virgins.htm, Aug 30, 2008)

5. **Talking taboos round the family dinner table**

www.yourlocalguardian.co.uk/leisure

If there's anything more excruciating than realising your parents have had sex, it's realising your children are going to have sex.

Such is the embarrassment surrounding the issue it's unlikely to be the first topic of conversation at most family dinner tables. But given the rise in teenage pregnancies and STIs, perhaps it should be.

So suggests *Virgins*, the latest play by writer/director John Retallack and his award-winning Company of Angels, who arrive at New Wimbledon Studio next week.

Searching for a follow-up to *Hannah and Hanna*, his acclaimed play about a Kosovan refugee and her British friend, Retallack was inspired to write *Virgins* by his own experiences as a father.

"My 17-year-old son had a friend over one day when this piece came on the radio about the spread of sexually transmitted infections," he recalls.

"I was shocked by the figures and yet there was this moment of inhibition when I came to discuss it. I ended up bringing it up when they were in the back of the car, via the rear view mirror! I can't believe it is so difficult to talk about."

The story of a family struggling to co-habit and copulate under one roof, *Virgins* centres around a teenage boy and his first sexual experience, a mother and sister who can talk about sex but not about feelings and a dad who struggles to say anything at all.

"It's a fictional set-up but it could happen to anyone," says Retallack.

"Most of us are brought up in a place with two or three bedrooms, and sex is probably the most important issue in our lives. Especially when you're a teenager, but why not when you're 48 as well?"

"This play is about the emotional inhibitions we all face and teenagers' desire for openness from their parents."

Like its predecessor, *Virgins* has been a huge success at this year's Edinburgh Fringe, where its audience applauded Angels' frank, funny and moving approach to a sticky subject. Several sexual health organisations have been in contact saying, 'This is what we have never had before', though Retallack insists the play was never intended as sex education.

He is also keen to defend its use of dance, which perplexed some critics.

"I often find plays are too long and wordy, too articulate in comparison to the way we actually talk," he says.

"There are things you can't say when it comes to sex but that eight or nine minutes of dance can communicate. Actors should be able to express things with their body as well as their voice."

And what of that closest of critics - his own son?

"He's fast asleep as we talk," says Retallack. "But he's coming to see the play in Wimbledon next week!"

(Nancy Groves, *Your Local Guardian*, www.yourlocalguardian.co.uk/leisure, Sept 8, 2006)

6. *Virgins*

It's an incredible simple premise; two teenagers fumble with their new-found sexuality while their parents desperately search for physical love, long-lost.

The teenagers can't understand their Mum and Dad, the Mum and Dad see themselves in their offspring but can't help trotting out the clichés of their own parents.

But John Retallack's *Virgins* works wonderfully precisely because it is so simple; an immensely likeable piece of writing that anyone with fond – or perhaps not so fond – memories of the riddles of middle-class family life can connect with.

The darker core is teased out with intermittent phases of dance. Never particularly spectacular, the jerky, dissonant movements do at least suggest the anguish of growing up and the frustration of not being able to fully break free – and one section provides the crux of the play; surprisingly, since the language here is so spot on too.

Seventeen-year-old Jack (the excellent Stefan Butler) is trying to sort the mess his life has become after getting trashed at a party and not being able to recall who he slept with. Embarrassingly for him, he has to visit an STI clinic.

He trashes around this small space to Arctic Monkey's *A Certain Romance*, and *Virgins* suddenly makes complete sense. Retallack's new work is just as eloquent a picture of modern life as Arctic Monkey Alex Turner's; and it would make for some interesting cross-generational dinner-table talk if it was experienced by as many people.

(Ben East, *Metro*, Aug 13, 2006)

7. Sex sells this family portrait

DOWN-TO-EARTH popular theatre for young people sits oddly in the context of the Fringe; by and large, the target audience just isn't there in Edinburgh in August. For all that, though, John Retallack's latest *Company of Angels* show is a fine little piece of modern British family drama and, if it doesn't quite achieve the high political resonance of Retallack's last major work for the company, the asylum-seeker drama *Hannah and Hanna*, it's subject – the complex sexual politics of the modern family with teenage kids – touches the lives of millions, and is desperately under-explored in British theatre.

The story centres on Jack, a scuzzy but attractive 17-year-old who wakes up in the front garden one morning after an all-night party, only to discover that he has somehow acquired a nasty sexual infection. He tells his goody-two-shoes little sister Zoe, who tells their househusband dad Nick, who flies into such a rage that career-woman Suzy is soon involved too.

Meanwhile, Nick and Suzy's marriage is going through a rough patch, since she is always too tired for sex. She accuses him of taking his frustrations out on his son, reminding him that parents of their young-in-the-1980s generation were no different in their teens; and Jack and Zoe wrestle with the joyless sexual culture of Britain today, which equates eroticism with cheap media porn, and real-life relationships with danger and disease.

At one level, this is simple stuff; but it's unusual to see it handled with the level of quiet eloquence, emotional sophistication, and sharp, down-to-earth realism achieved by Retallack's fine script. The play is punctuated by some strong, precise dance sequences by Fleur Darlin, and features an unobtrusively clever set by Liz Cooke, built around the miniature doll's house image of the ideal home. All four actors give performances of terrific conviction and humanity; if you want an image, in dark and light, of the average British family after 40 years of rapid sexual change, then this show is as clear and compassionate a starting point as you could hope to find.

(Joyce McMillan, *The Scotsman*, Aug 21, 2006)

8. Virgins

Seventeen-year-old Jack went to a party and can't remember anything much about it. Except now he's got more than a blinding hangover – he's got a sexually transmitted infection. Meanwhile, his 15-year-old sister Zoe has been saving herself for the right man; unlike Jack, she wants to be able to remember her first sexual encounter. Their parents, Suzy and Nick, are barely doing it at all; in fact, they're barely talking. Suzy has retreated from the family, taking refuge in her work, and Nick is taking his frustrations out on the kids. The news of Jack's escapade throws the whole family into turmoil.

There will be plenty of shows on the Fringe that are both sexier and showier than *Virgins*, but few that are quite as truthful. Like Jack Retallack's previous hit, *Hannah and Hanna*, this little show has an unpretentious charm and directness, taking a subject that might easily have been treated like a government advertisement for safer adolescent sex into a knotty examination of the family itself, our attitudes towards sex and pleasure, and what happens when the shine rubs off a marriage and we forget both the thrill of sexual encounter or indeed what it was like to be young.

Liz Cooke's clever set is designed around a miniature house – like something out of a children's story, there are fairytale images of going into the dark wood to discover yourself, and Fleur Darkin's choreography offers a glimpse into the emotional state of a group of people who often find that words fail them entirely, or who are trying to hide their feeling, or even their histories. There are moments when the energy dips and it feels a little earnest, but this is a show that never shirks from telling uncomfortable truths.

(Lyn Gardner, *The Guardian*, Aug 11, 2006)

9. **Virgins**

By John Retallack

Company of Angels

There is a whole complex of themes running through this apparently simple domestic drama. In a family with two children, a boy of seventeen and a girl of fifteen, the kids are just discovering sex. The girl takes a romantic but sensible attitude; the boy plays the field. The mother goes out to work, the father stays at home and looks after the children and the house.

The play touches on the respective roles of fathers and mothers, drink and drugs, adolescent sex, sexually transmitted infections, the relationship between the generations, growing up, relations between the generations, friendship – a whole pot pourri of 21st century (indeed eternal) problems, but it does so without any attempt to preach or even provide solutions apart from the need for trust. The complexities of familial relationships are well drawn, as are the characters. What at first appear to be almost stereotypes gradually deepen and whole minefields are revealed.

Like many other shows this Fringe, there is an element of multi-genre work here. At points between the scenes there are short dances which further reveal and deepen the character's feelings and relationships, adding an extra level to the already complex piece.

(Peter Lathan, *The British Theatre Guide*)

10. **Virgins**

CONTROVERSY and sex also dominate *Virgins*, an innovative piece that uses engaging choreography amidst a more straightforward play format to illuminate the combative world of family and sexual relations. Workaholic mother no-longer wants to have sex with stay-at-home father; son, fuelled by a diet of drink and drugs, can't keep his in his trousers; and daughter, frustrated by the behaviour of her emotionally messed-up family, adopts a more mature approach to the question of intimacy.

Asking how, with all the contraceptives and education promoting safe sex available, so many young people forget all they've learned in a moment of so-called passion, this piece is funny, insightful and unpatronising. The performances are strong (especially the frustrated father, played by Peter Machen) and the set elegantly bare – only a small doll-sized house is used to symbolise the locus of the family – with beautiful lighting designs used to signify locale change. This is an interesting play that gives food for thought for both adults and young people alike – pity there weren't more of the latter in the audience.

(AMcL, *The Herald*, Aug. 16, 2006)

X. Lyrics: A Certain Romance

Artist: Arctic Monkeys
Album: Whatever People Say I Am, That's What I'm Not
Year: 2005
Title: A Certain Romance

Well oh they might wear classic Reeboks
Or knackered Converse
Or tracky bottoms tucked in socks
But all of that's what the point is not
The point's that there ain't no romance around there
And there's the truth that they can't see
They'd probably like to throw a punch at me
And if you could only see them, then you would agree
Agree that there ain't no romance around there

You know, oh it's a funny thing you know
We'll tell 'em if you like
We'll tell 'em all tonight
They'll never listen
Cause their minds are made up
And course it's all okay to carry on that way

And over there there's broken bones
There's only music, so that there's new ringtones
And it don't take no Sherlock Holmes
To see it's a little different around here

Don't get me wrong, oh there's boys in bands
And kids who like to scrap with pool cues in their hands
And just cause he's had a couple of cans
He thinks it's alright to act like a dickhead

Don't you know, oh it's a funny thing you know
We'll tell em if you like
We'll tell em all tonight
They'll never listen
Cause their minds are made up
And course it's all okay to carry on that way

But I said
No! Oh no!
Well you won't get me to go!
Not anywhere, not anywhere
No I won't go
Oh no no!

Well over there there's friends of mine
What can I say, I've known 'em for a long long time
And yeah they might overstep the line
But I just cannot get angry in the same way
Not, not in the same way
Not in the same way
Oh no, oh no no

(<http://www.lyricsmania.com>, May 21, 2008)

- Could any of the lines in the song relate to any aspects in the play?

XI. Father and Son

The Relationship between Nick (40) and Jack (17)

Contextualizing

Find exactly in the text where each of these short extracts (A to E) appear. What has just happened before? What happens next? In which way is the last extract so different from the others? What has happened in between to lead to this change?

- A. Nick: Do you hear me, Jack?
Jack: I know. Dad. I know now.
Nick: But you should know better – shouldn't you? Then you wouldn't be in this mess.
Jack. Alright, Dad. Thanks Dad.
Nick: Don't try to stop me talking about it.
Jack: It's just you never talked about it before, Dad...
- B. Nick: You are a waste of time and a waste of space. My father would have beaten hell out of me if I'd been like you. You're lucky I've not taken after him, aren't you, Jack?
- C. Nick: You lose things, don't you? You've always lost your bag, your money, your phone – well now you've lost my respect.
- D. Nick: You should try meeting new people.
- E. Nick: You're good-looking; you're funny; you're popular. I'm sure girls find you attractive.
Jack: Are you serious?

Task: Sharing an Idea

Imagine you are the stage director of the play. You have the idea of including the song *Father & Son*, by **Cat Stevens (1972)** in a production of the play.

- Try and convince other members of the production team (stage manager, set designer, sound designer and operator), as well as the actors, that the song should be included within the text of the play.
- Offer reasons for including the song.
- Propose where exactly it should be inserted in the script.
- Always bear in mind that any such idea has to be practical and workable from a drama point of view.

Lesson Plan (for the teacher)

Aims

- **to speculate and predict**
- **for aural discrimination**
- **to interpret differences in a listening text**
- **to make suggestions**

Leading In

1. What sort of advice might a father like Nick give his 17-year-old son, Jack?
(‘Trust...’, ‘You’re’, ‘If you, ...’)

- How might the 17-year-old son react?
(‘How can I...?’, ‘It’s always the same:’, ‘I have to...’)
- Read the first part of the song *Father and Son*, by Cat Stevens (1972)
Try and complete the gaps in your own way.

*It’s not time to make a / Just, take it easy
You’re still, that’s your fault/ There’s so you have to
.....
Find a girl, settle / If you want you can
Look at me, I am, but I’m happy.
I was once like you are, and I know that’s not easy,
To be calm when you’ve something
For you will still be here, but your may not.*

- Now listen to this first part of the song. Were your guesses the same, similar or even different?
- Listen carefully to the second part of the song. Correct any words that are wrongly printed here.

*How can I try to explain, when I do he runs away.
It’s often been the same, same cold story.
From the moment I could walk, I was ordered to listen.
No there’s no way and I know I have to go away.
I know I have to go.*

(Key Wrong: runs, often, cold, walk, no

Right: turns, always, old, talk, a)

- Listen to the third part of the song. The father’s words are almost the same as the first part.
Note down any differences you hear.
(Key: sit down/ slowly/ go through)

What could this tell us about the father’s attitude towards his son?

- Finally, hear how the son reacts to his father’s advice.

(Tapescript:	Son	Father
	All the times	Stay, stay, stay
	That I’ve cried	Why must you go
	Keeping all the	And make this decision
	Things I knew inside	Alone?
	It’s hard, but it’s harder	
	To ignore it	
	If they were right, I’d agree	
	But it’s then they know not me	
	Now there’s a way	
	And I know that I have to go away	

I know I have to go.)

Working out

1. Throughout the song, the father recommends his son to 'sit down, relax, take it easy'. Do you think that he himself is really relaxed, or do his words express a different attitude? Such as...
 - a. lack of interest
 - b. resignation
 - c. wisdom
 - d. irresponsibility
 - e. indifference
 - f. egotism
 - g. laziness

2. 'From the moment I could talk I was ordered to listen.'

Which is the attitude of the grown-up father towards his adolescent son in the song in general, and in the above line in particular?

Living through

In this song we find a particular technique being used: two people speaking at the same time.

A. What is the relation between the form and the content?
What does it express? (a call and response? a reinforcement? an echo? a dialogue? an argument? a reply? a contradiction? a commentary? a ?)

B. Which differences in (a) voice level and (b) tone of voice can you hear between the father and the son?

Following up

The differences in attitude and tone of voice between father and son might reflect a 'generation and communication gap'.

- List those aspects in the song that lead to such a 'gap'.
- Suggest ways of 'bridging' such a 'gap'.
- Writing task: write the letter or e-mail (150 – 200 words) from the son to father after he has left home.

XII. Follow-up Activities

Movement Tasks

(with due acknowledgement to the Company of Angels for their *Virgins Resource Pack 2006*)

This series of task can be done with students with no movement/dance experience. It is important that the tasks are carried out in the order which they appear and that no reference

to the discussion points be made till afterwards, so that the movement tasks are not influenced by the issues until after the discussion.

Warm up

Whole group to spread out in the space.

- Walk around the room always moving into the spaces that you see.
- Choose one person to keep away from and one person to follow, while you are moving around the room.

Task 1 – individually in a space

- Sign your name on an imaginary page in the air in front of you. Experiment with making it bigger and smaller.
- Now transfer the pen onto different body parts – e.g. elbow, knee, big toe, nose, etc. and use the whole space around your body, not just the imaginary page in front of you to sign your name. Play with the style of your signature so that it brings out your character – e.g. if you are a busy type, find ways to show that as you move, or if you are like taking your time show that in your movement.

Task 2 – In pairs, label yourselves A and B

- Sculpting the body. A moves B's body parts to create a sculpture. B must allow A to move his/her body however he/she wants (within their physical capability!). (Swap round once A has created several sculptures on B).

Task 3 – Still in pairs

- A is the looker and B is the mover. B must only move the body part that A looks at. A should keep changing the part that s/he looks at so that B has to keep changing the moving body part.
- A can experiment with the way s/he looks at the body parts to influence the way B has to move – e.g. A looks angrily at B's left hand so B has to move left hand in an angry way.
- Try speeding up the looking, so you change the body part every few seconds to put your partner under pressure to change quickly. (Swap round once you had a go.)

Task 4 – Still in pairs

- A bombards B with verbal instructions about how to move – e.g. 'Lift your head up; stretch your arms up; stick out your tongue; lie flat on the floor; spin on your bottom', etc.
- A must try not to pause, but just say the first instruction that comes into their head each time, however odd/funny or strange it may be. B must surrender

to anything B says and just do it without question or argument. (Swap round once you had a go.)

Discussion points

The discussion can take place in the pairs, in smaller groups joining 2 or 3 pairs together, or in larger groups. This is up to the group leader.

- How did it feel to be A and how did it feel to be B in tasks 2-4?
- Discuss the status differences between A and B.
- Relate being A to your parents, teachers, peers, the media, and other influential people/groups in your life.
- Relate being B to yourself.

Try repeating tasks 2-4 in your pairs with the following scenarios in your minds.

- A is the media (television/radio/internet/magazines, etc.) bombarding B with imagery about how to be, how to act and what is right and wrong...
- A is putting pressure on B to have sex with him/her at a party...
- A is B's parent telling them about using contraception, being careful, asking uncomfortable questions...

Now discuss the outcomes as a whole group referring to the discussion points above.