

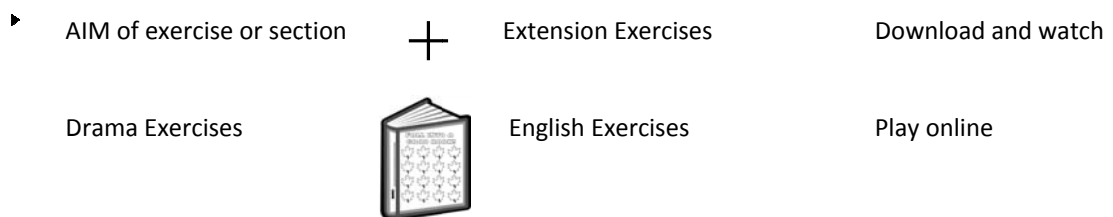
Les Liaisons Dangereuses

By Christopher Hampton

From the Novel By Choderlos de Laclos

Video Stills by Sam Taylor-Wood

Education Resource written by Kerreen Ely-Harper and compiled by Education Coordinator Toni Murphy



LES LIAISONS DANGEREUSES

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CREATIVE TEAM

Director – Sam Strong

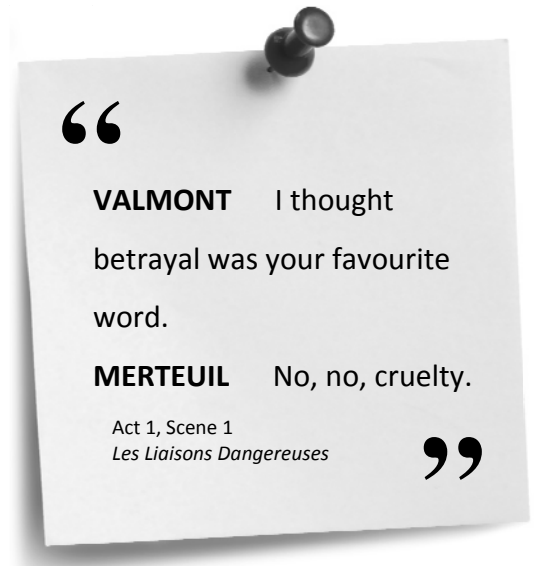
Set Designer – Dale Ferguson

Costume Designer – Mel Page

Lighting Designer – Hartley T A Kemp

Composer – Alan John

Sound Designer – Steve Francis



CAST

La Presidente de Tourvel – Justine Clarke

Cecile Volanges – Geraldine Hakewill

Mme de Rosemonde – Jane Harders

Le Chavalier Danceny – James Mackay

Mme de Volanges – Heather Mitchell

Major-domo/Azolan – TJ Power

La Marquise de Merteuil – Pamela Rabe

Emilie – Ashley Ricardo

Le Vicomte de Valmont – Hugo Weaving

THEMES

Historical Drama

Adaptation

Morality & Power

Social Relationships

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Act One

Warm August evening. A salon in the Paris hotel of Mme la Marquise de Merteuil.

Fifteen year old CECILE is adjusting to her new life in the outside world having just left the convent where she was being educated. She is watching her mother, MME DE VOLANGES, a widow play cards in the Salon of her mother's cousin widower, MME LA MARQUISE DE MERTEUIL. Volanges is protective of her daughter and expresses concern when Merteuil wants to introduce her to her former lover, the charming but notorious, LE VICOMTE DE VALMONT

When Volanges and Cécile leave Merteuil asks Valmont to help her settle a score with the COMTE DE GERCOURT who is planning to marry Cécile. Gercourt is a former lover of Merteuil who left her for one of Valmont's mistresses. Merteuil's current lover, Belleruche has recently also left her. She wants Valmont to seduce Cecile to take revenge on Gercourt for his unfaithfulness. But Valmont is not interested and more keen on seducing the moral and strictly religious MADAME DE TOURVEL, the wife of a magistrate. Tourvel is currently living with MME DE ROSEMONDE, Valmont's aunt while her husband is away presiding over a court case. Merteuil then changes tact and promises Valmont if he seduces Madame de Tourvel with "written proof" she will agree to have sex with him.

A few weeks later Valmont is at his aunt's chateau in the country. He interviews his valet, AZOLAN who runs errands, spies and reports on who is doing what and where. Valmont begins his seduction of Tourvel, who terrified by his advances refuses his attentions. He continues his sexual liaisons with EMILIE, a courtesan, while he writes his first love letter to Tourvel.

Returning to Paris, he reports back to Merteuil on his lack of progress in seducing Tourvel. Merteuil feels he has made a 'tactical error' by not forcing himself on her, implying he should have raped her. Valmont defends himself saying he didn't want to be caught by his aunt.

Valmont is furious when he learns that Volanges has been writing to Tourvel telling her what a vile "pervert" he is. Wanting revenge he is now willing to help Merteuil ruin Cécile's

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reputation. Merteuil tells him that Cécile and her music tutor LE CHEVALIER DANCENY have fallen in love. Merteuil and Valmont plan to trick the lovers into entrusting the secret of their affair with them. Valmont promises to carry and exchange their love letters.

When Mme de Volanges makes another visit to Merteuil, she says Cécile has formed a 'dangerous liaison' with the penniless Danceny. Distraught Volanges thanks Merteuil for informing her. As Volanges leaves, Valmont comes out of hiding and the two are jubilant their plotting is going so well. He makes a sexual advance toward her but she refuses, reminding him of their agreement for his seduction of Tourvel to be in writing.

A week later at Mme de Rosemonde's, Valmont forces Cécile to submit to his sexual advances bargaining he will agree to pass on Danceny's letters and not tell her mother. When Cécile seeks Merteuil's advice, she tells her to "continue your instruction" with Valmont. Volanges is worried about Cécile's poor health and believes she may have been wrong to not have allowed her to see Danceny. Merteuil manages to talk her out of it.

Cécile soon becomes Valmont's consenting lover. Tourvel becomes overcome with distress at Valmont's pursuit of her and she collapses into an epileptic convulsion in his arms. Tourvel tells Mme de Rosemonde that she must leave her house because of being now "desperately in love" with Valmont.

Act Two

Late October, Paris

Azolan reports to Valmont with two letters. Valmont is cross with him for not letting him know of Tourvel's departure. An unsuspecting Danceny thanks Valmont for "keeping our love alive". Valmont tells Merteuil that he has met his part of the bargain with seducing Cecile. But she will not submit to his demand for sex until he conquers Tourvel. He returns again to Tourvel and finally seduces her. When he reports back to Merteuil, she becomes jealous and tells him she has a new lover but does not reveal who it is. When he leaves Danceny comes out of his hiding place.

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Valmont is with Emilie when he crosses paths with Tourvel in a Paris salon. Recognising she is a prostitute, Tourvel becomes distressed and tries to leave the room. He manages to get her to calm down and accept his explanation of Emilie as a casual acquaintance who donates large amounts of her earnings to charity and does some secretarial work for him and nothing more.

Valmont visits Merteuil and finds Danceny is with her. Valmont tells him Cécile has returned to Paris to be with him but has not been able to find him and is now very ill. On hearing this Danceny becomes instantly concerned. Merteuil asks him to leave her and Valmont alone as they need to discuss a matter in private. Valmont mocks her choice of Danceny as a lover. She says she is completely satisfied, causing Valmont to collapse into a wounded silence. When she asks him if Cécile is really ill he tells her Cécile has had a miscarriage after a night of rough sex with him. She invites him to visit her again in a week and inadvertently tells him if he leaves Tourvel she will fulfill her promise of spending the night with him.

Valmont visits Tourvel for the last time and tells her that he is in love with another woman and cannot continue a relationship with her. She becomes hysterical and collapses into inconsolable grief.

When he meets again with Merteuil he expects her to meet her part of the bargain. She tells him she knew he really loved Tourvel and that she tricked him into giving up the opportunity for true happiness for vanity. In retaliation he reveals that he has co-ordinated Danceny to reunite with Cécile, leaving Merteuil abandoned and alone again. He reiterates his demand for sex, which she again refuses. She declares war on him and in revenge reveals to Danceny that Valmont has seduced Cécile. Danceny and Valmont duel, and Valmont is wounded. Refusing a surgeon he makes amends with Danceny by warning him of Merteuil's involvement in the plan to betray Cécile.

On learning of Valmont's death Tourvel dies of "delirium". Volanges worried about Cécile's welfare considers allowing her to be re-united with Danceny rather than sending her back to the convent. But Merteuil fearing Danceny would reveal her part in the deaths to Volanges advises her to return Cécile to the safety and silence of the convent.

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Consider

Desire is maintained through dissatisfaction

Keep your friends close and your enemies closer

Merteuil is a psychopath

Sociopaths have no heart, no conscience, no remorse

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HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL BACKGROUND OF THE PLAY

I am not surprised that a son of Monsieur de Choderlos should write so well. Wit is hereditary in his family. But I cannot commend him for employing his talents, his invention and his elegant pen to furnish foreigners with so appalling a notion of the manners of his nation and of taste of his compatriots

Mme Riccoboni
April, 1782

Within two weeks of its publication *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* had sold over two thousand copies. The French Queen Marie Antoinette ordered a copy but had the author's name hidden on the binding so that she would not be discovered reading it. The book was described as a 'diabolical' indictment on French society and while causing moral outrage it was one of the most popular books of its day, earning the status of a 'users manual' for aspiring seducers. In 1823 it was banned by a Paris court 'for outrage to public morality'.

Les Liaisons Dangereuses was written by Pierre Ambroise François Choderlos de Laclos in 1782. This 'monster of intrigue' came from a noble family, was educated and trained to be a military officer in the French army. He fought in Napoleon's early campaigns and died in 1803 during a military campaign from suspected malaria and dysentery. *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* was his only novel. He wrote an opera and began three essays on the education of women that he did not complete. In these essays he proposed that the 'natural woman' was enslaved by a society dominated by men and as long as women remained slaves they could not be educated. These liberal views were consistent with the eighteenth century French Enlightenment Movement. The novel was of the 'Libertine' (or erotic) genre which included writers and political satirists such as the Marquis de Sade, Diderot and Voltaire. The libertine writer advocated 'free-thought' against the Church and established morality through the shock value of eroticism as a form of satire. Within the libertine movement the balance often tipped toward the writing of pornography rather than the political. *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* does not stray too far into the pornographic as it is fundamentally concerned with moral questions and the application of reason to solve social and moral problems and the consequences of when reason is used to destroy and undermine ethical behaviour. *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* has aptly been described as combining the 'barbed wit' of Voltaire and the 'soaring passionate idealism of Rousseau'.

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Jaques Rousseau was a contemporary, philosopher and writer whose works were a critical influence on de Choderlos de Laclos's representation of women and education in the novel.

An epistolary novel, the narrative is structured as one hundred and seventy five letters written from the characters to each other. *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* has been adapted into plays, an opera, novels and films in various forms. In 1985 Christopher Hampton adapted it for the Royal Shakespeare Company at Stratford-Upon-Avon. The decadent behaviour of the characters is viewed as a prelude to the destruction of a society about to embark on bloody revolution. Considered as a 'political reading' of the original material, Hampton went onto write the screen play for the Stephen Frears' film *Dangerous Liaison* (1989).

Reference:

Les Liaisons Dangereuses, De Laclos, Douglas Parmee, David Coward, 1999

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Additional Resources

Film Adaptations



Dangerous Liaisons directed by Stephen Frears, 1989.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FbB2oBIP2uI>

Valmont Milos Forman, 1991

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=llU4rz1Sdmg>

Les Liaisons Dangereuses, Rodger Vadim, 1959

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jydn56Cr9tw>

Les Liaisons Dangereuses, Josee Dayan, 2003

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8iP3Nmwxn-0>

Une Femme Fidele, Rodger Vadim, 1976

Cruel Intentions Roger Kumble, 1999

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pQKlstAGqzU&feature=related>

Stage & Opera Adaptations

Les Liaisons dangereuses, Paul Achard, 1952

Les Liaisons Dangereuses, 'an epistolary opera' Claude Prey, 1974

Amor di Guerra, Guerra d'amore, Alberto Cesare Alberti, 1960

Gefahrliche Liebschaften, Rudolf Fleck 1979

Quartett, Heiner Muller 1981

French Enlightenment & Society

Marie Antoinette, Sofia Coppola, 2006



Women of the French Salons and English Coffeehouses of the 18th century

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SbRGIFIBcQk>

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- ▶ **AIM:** To introduce and understand the social and historical background to *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*.

The French Enlightenment



Research the French Enlightenment

Form small groups

Choose an area you are interested in or that you are currently studying.

For example:

- | | | |
|-----------------|----------------------|-------------------------|
| - Fashion | - Architecture | - Religion & Clergy |
| - Music | - Visual Arts | - Marriage |
| - Dance | - Theatre | - Health & Medicine |
| - Salon Culture | - Opera | - Women |
| - Food & Wine | - Crime & Punishment | - Duelling |
| - Sexuality | - Family & Childhood | - Politics & Government |
| - Literature | - Education | |

Devise a 3 minute presentation based on your group's area of research.

Focus on providing information with specific examples that will contribute to your understanding of the historical and social world represented in the play.



Extension:

Discuss why the 'Enlightenment' is also referred to as the 'Age of Reason'?

Inside The Salon

The Paris salon of the eighteenth century was a meeting place for men and women, intellectuals, academics, writers, artists, courtesans, and wealthy socialites to come together, discuss, exchange and argue ideas and philosophies.

“

MERTEUIL

So you've left the convent
for good?

Act 1, Scene 1
Les Liaisons Dangereuses

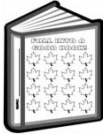
”

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Google the history & development of the salon.

Drawing on your research

Write a short piece from the point of view of a person living in Paris during the Enlightenment.

The year is 1782.

The person can be based on a real life historical figure such as Voltaire, Marie Antoinette, Marquis de Sade, Pierre Choderlos de Laclos etc

OR

A fictional character created from your research sources.

Include their views on the recently published *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*.



Role-play a salon meeting where the topic of conversation will be the new novel by Pierre Choderlos de Laclos.

The topic of debate:

Is *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* a 'diabolical' or true indictment on French society?

Many salons had rules of etiquette to ensure civil and responsible behaviour in debates.

Devise 5 rules your characters must abide by in the debate.

When viewing the STC performance

How is the historical period represented through the use of the theatrical elements?

How do the social behaviours of the characters contrast and compare with your understanding and knowledge of the eighteenth century salon?

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- ▶ **AIM:** To understand the letters as a narrative device for developing intrigue and suspense in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*

The Art of Letter Writing



Have you ever sent an email that you regretted sending? Or that went to the wrong person?

Tell us what happened.

Write a short piece based on your personal experience or on a story you have heard.

Electronic documents such as voice recordings, blogs, tweets, SMS's, facebook posts, and e-mails for many people have replaced the hand written letters.

When was the last time you wrote a hand written letter? Or received one?

What situations do you think it is better to write a hand written letter than send an email?

“ **VALMONT**

You can't seriously imagine there's a woman in the world I could ever prefer to you?

Act 2, Scene 3
Les Liaisons Dangereuses

”



Call out a letter from the alphabet

Make the shape of the letter with your body.

Form small groups

Think of a five letter word and make the shape of the word with your bodies

Each group make a word to then form a simple sentence.

Turn the simple sentence into a message, secret, a call for help, bad news.

Make a love letter

Make a revenge letter



In the play *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* letters become objects of power and intrigue.

Write, Devise & Perform a story, play script, radio drama constructed entirely out of letters, emails, tweets, blogs, SMS's or a combination of different texts.

Add a complication - the letter text goes to the wrong person, is not received, was not meant to be sent.

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Extensions:

Write the first love letter from Cécile to Danceny.

Write his reply letter.

Write a letter from Cécile to a close friend who lives in the convent telling the story of what has happened to her. She has just had a miscarriage.

Write a letter from Danceny to Mme de Volanges asking her to re-consider her decision to not allow him to marry Cécile. Valmont has just died.

Write the last letter from Valmont to Mme de Tourvel after Merteuil declares war, explaining his behaviour and revealing his true feelings for her. Tourvel never receives this letter.

Performance Reflection:

Why does the playwright choose not to reveal to the audience the contents of the letters?

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- ▶ **AIM: To examine the representation of women and men in the play.**



Read & Discuss Merteuil's speech to Valmont

Act 1, Scene 4

VALMONT I often wonder how you managed to invent yourself.

MERTEUIL I had no choice, did I, I'm a woman. Women are obliged to be far more skilful than men, because who ever wastes time cultivating inessential skills? You think you put as much ingenuity into winning us as we put into losing: well, it's debatable, I suppose, but from then on, you hold the ace in the pack. You can ruin us whenever the fancy takes you: all we can achieve by denouncing you is to enhance your prestige. We can't even get rid of you when we want to: we're compelled to unstitch, painstakingly, what you would just cut through. We either have to devise some way of making you want to leave us, so you'll feel too guilty to harm us; or find a reliable means of blackmail: otherwise you can destroy our reputation and our life with a few well-chosen words. So of course I had to invent: not only myself, but ways of escape no one else has ever thought of, not even I, because I had to be fast enough on my feet to know how to improvise. And I've succeeded, because I always knew I was born to dominate your sex and avenge my own.

How does Merteuil's attitude to being a woman reflect the position of women in eighteenth century Europe?

What do her feelings about men and women reveal about her character? About her society?

If we took away the historical context and placed the scene in 2012 how different would it be?

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Extension:

Compare & Contrast Merteuil's speech with Emilia's speech to her mistress, Desdemona in Shakespeare's *Othello*

Act 4, Scene 3

EMILIA: But I do think it is their husbands' faults

If wives do fall: say that they slack their duties,
And pour our treasures into foreign laps,
Or else break out in peevish jealousies,
Throwing restraint upon us; or say they strike us,
Or scant our former having in despite;
Why, we have galls, and though we have some grace,
Yet have we some revenge. Let husbands know
Their wives have sense like them: they see and smell
And have their palates both for sweet and sour,
As husbands have. What is it that they do
When they change us for others? Is it sport?
I think it is: and doth affection breed it?
I think it doth: is't frailty that thus errs?
It is so too: and have not we affections,
Desires for sport, and frailty, as men have?
Then let them use us well: else let them know,
The ills we do, their ills instruct us so.

Discuss & Debate

How are the speeches similar in their views on men and women's behavior? Different?

Are the attitudes expressed in both pieces about the differences between the way women and men behave still relevant today or are they based on out dated social stereotypes?

How are boys and girls different? What are the similarities between them?

How do girls see themselves in relation to boys? And vice versa?

How do boys think girls perceive them? And vice versa?

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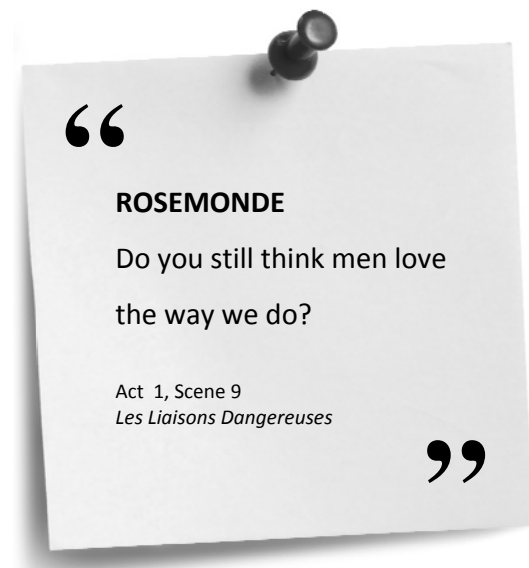
Write & Present a monologue from the contemporary point of view of a woman

OR

man on the differences between men and women.

OR

A dialogue between a young woman and a young man discussing and debating their behaviour and attitudes toward their own sex and each others.



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- ▶ **AIM: To explore the intentions and actions of the characters in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses***

Defining Intentions

Intention - application or direction of the mind: design: purpose:
application of thought to an object: a concept: a plan
Chambers English Dictionary

The Drinking Exercise

Examine the everyday situation of drinking a cup of water to understand how playing an intention causes you to make a choice that leads to taking an action:

- You are thirsty
- Your intention is to satisfy your thirst by making a choice to drink a cup of water
- Your action is to get a cup of water
- You swallow the water and achieve your objective



What are the character's intentions in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*?

How do the character's intentions cause them to make choices that affect their actions?



Read & examine the following scene with a partner.

Look for aspects of the situation, which affect the way Valmont and Merteuil act.

Consider

1. Physical Environment – time, place
2. Social Environment – behaviours, presence of others
3. Situation – internal and external factors which are creating urgency and tension between Valmont and Merteuil

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Act 1, Scene 4

Danceney has left the room, leaving Valmont and Merteuil alone momentarily before Cecile's mother Mme de Volanges arrives.

Valmont turns back to Merteuil

Valmont So this is the scene you have planned for me?

Merteuil If you'd care to go behind the screen (*She indicates a screen in a corner of the room, a trace of anxious impatience in her voice*)

Valmont I think you might have consulted me before offering my services as general factotum to that exasperating boy. I don't find the lovers' complaints remotely entertaining outside of the Opera.

Merteuil I was sure that if anyone could help him...

Valmont Help? He doesn't need help, he needs hindrances: if he has to climb over enough of them, he might inadvertently fall on top of her.

Merteuil I'll see what I can do: now, Vicomte, the screen.

Valmont starts moving towards it, then hesitates

Valmont Are you sure I shouldn't confront her? Give her some evidence for those rude letters?

Merteuil Quick.

Valmont moves swiftly and is only just behind the screen in time not to be seen by Mme de Volanges, as she's shown in by the Major-domo

Merteuil, who has assumed a grave expression, rises to greet Mme de Volanges, kissing her on both cheeks.

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Describe the actions of the characters.

- What is Merteuil's intention? Valmont's intention?
- What does Merteuil want Valmont to do?
- What does Valmont want from Merteuil? Why does he not go straight behind the screen when she asks him to?
- What choices do the characters make to achieve their objectives?



Rehearse & perform the scene fully exploring the character's intentions.



Extension:

Write the subtext of the scene – what is *not* being said directly to the other character.

Perform the scene speaking Merteuil and Valmont's inner and unsaid thoughts.

Main Actions

Character grows out of action

Robert L Benedetti

Discuss this statement with reference to how the characters in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* are defined by their actions.



Choose the character you would most like to play in the production.

Explain why have you chosen this character?

Why do you think you would play this character well?

What is the dramatic function of your character?

How does the writer use the character to heighten the dramatic action?

What is the character's purpose in the play?

If you took this character out of the play how would it change the drama?

Intentions exercise:

- What do you want?
- What choices do you have?
- What action do you take in order to achieve your objective?

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Consider how this main action enables your character to fulfil his/her dramatic function.

Support your choices with specific references and quotes from the play text.



Choose a scene to perform from the play script where your character plays out his/her main action to the fullest.



Extension:

Choose the character you least like in the play.

Explain why you don't like this character?

What is their dramatic function? Main action in the drama?

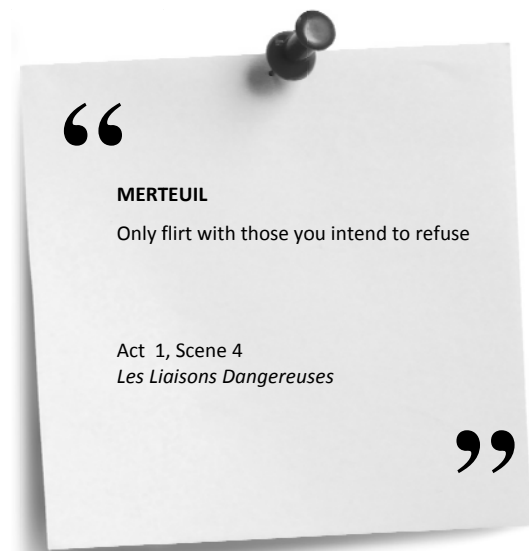
If you took this character out of the play how would it change the drama?

Post-performance Reflection:

Which actor's performance did you enjoy the most?

Give 3 reasons why you liked their work with specific reference to how they interpreted and performed their character.

Ref: *The Actor At Work* , Robert L Benedetti



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- ▶ **AIM:** To understand and critique the production vision and use of theatrical elements.

Metaphor & Image

Look at the video-stills image created by Sam Taylor-Woods on the STC's *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* web page.



Watch the Youtube video of the original work (2001)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MlzXWGcb3u0>

With reference to *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, what does the image of decaying fruit represent? The inclusion of the pen?



Design an image, moving or still image sequence for a poster, flyer, website, or youtube clip that encapsulates a metaphor of the play's major themes.

The Director's Vision



Read the blog post by director Sam Strong

<http://blog.sydneytheatre.com.au/?page=4>



Discuss his approach to directing the play. What questions does he ask? What are his main concerns?

List 3 key ideas that describe his vision for the production.

Support your choices with direct quotes from the STC blog.

Compare & contrast the director's statement with your experience of attending the production.

List 3 things you liked about the production.

List 3 things you didn't like or agree with in the director's interpretation.

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List 3 things you would have changed if you had directed this production (consider production design, staging and performance style)



Extension:

Drawing on your opinions of the production, **write** a 250 word letter or email to the director outlining your views on his directorial approach.

Key Creatives At Work



Set Design

Research the work of designer Dale Ferguson.

List 3 key features of his design style with reference to productions such as *Exit The King* for Belvoir (2009) and *God Of Carnage* for the Melbourne Theatre Company (2009).

List 3 things you liked about the *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* design.

List 3 design elements that contributed to creating the physical environment of the play - time, place

List 3 design elements that contributed to creating the social environment – behaviours and relationships between characters.

Costume Design



Research the work of designer Mel Page

<https://www.theloop.com.au/melpage/portfolio/Costume-Designer/Melbourne>

List 5 key features of the costume design.

Consider

Style – historical and cultural references

Pattern & repetition

Influences & inspirations

Emotion & mood



Colour Palette & tone

Discuss & debate how the costume design has contributed to the interpretation of character.



Choose 2 contrasting characters from the play. For example, Merteuill and de Tourvel, Valmont and Danceney, Cecile and Emilie.

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List key characteristics for each character – note their physical appearance, behaviour, attitude and beliefs, main actions.

Describe the costume design for each character.

Compare & contrast their costume – how are they the same? Different?

Discuss how the costume design has enhanced the character’s specific individual qualities.

Music & Sound Design



Describe the use of music and sound in the production.

Choose 2 moments where you felt the music and sound design added to the tension or mood of the scene.

Explain how Alan John’s music and Steve Francis’s sound design has contributed to achieving the director’s vision.



Extension:

Read composer Alan John’s blog on his approach to composing music for theatre

<http://blog.sydneytheatre.com.au/season-2012-q-a-with-composer-alan-john>

Lighting



Research the work of lighting designer, Hartley T A Kemp.

Look at his website slideshow

<http://www.hartleykemp.com/>

List 3 key features of his design style.



Compare & contrast his lighting designs of various productions with his design for *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*.

Describe the mood and emotional tone of the production.

Choose a key moment in the performance where lighting was critical in achieving dramatic affect.

Consider

Colour palette

Location and setting

Colour temperature – hot, cold, warm

Movement – lighting transitions during or

Special effects

between scenes

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