KIT Theatre

Immersive work in schools: A Performer’s Handbook

Introduction…………………………..p2
KIT Theatre…………………………..p3
Actors………………………………...p5
School life……………………………p8
Useful scenarios………………………..p10
Tips from teachers……………………p16
Introduction to the handbook

There is no beginning and end to a school performance. As an actor, you are in character the whole time, including in the classrooms, corridors and canteen of the school. Detail is everything - children are incredibly perceptive and will pick up on any inconsistencies with character background, story and costume. Because of this, it can be an incredibly demanding area of work for an actor and here at KIT we want to support actors, especially those who haven’t worked in immersive theatre before, to feel supported entering a school for the very first time.

We have spoken to KIT’s community of actors, producers and delivery teams, and teachers along the way to create this handbook and hope that this information is useful and practical.

Best wishes,
The KIT team.

Co-authors of this handbook:

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KIT Theatre

KIT Theatre’s mission is to make playful, immersive theatre for, by and with young people which develops their creativity, empathy, resilience and critical thinking.

At the heart of KIT’s practice are Adventures in Learning, interactive stories which erupt in classrooms and cultural venues using immersive theatre and game mechanics to deliver formal learning and develop creativity. Informed by pedagogical practices such as Mantle of The Expert, the Adventures in Learning model has been honed over 10 years and experienced by more than 20,000 pupils across the UK.

KIT’s Adventures in Learning

- 1-day Inspiration Days. These are short-form Adventures in Learning, with a whole narrative arc delivered across a single day.
- Multi Episode ‘long form’ adventures. Lasting between 3 and 5 weeks, these are teacher-led Adventures in Learning where characters make contact with pupils through emails and videos, before the adventure culminates in a live theatrical finale with actors arriving in school.
- Creative Development Adventures in Learning. The missions at the heart of these adventures require pupils to write their own stories or create their own theatre, working with KIT storysmiths and directors to develop their own creative work.
- Takeovers: These adventures takeover an entire school for one week, with normal lessons suspended and every year group given specific missions within a single overarching storyline. Takeovers usually coincide with ‘special’ weeks such as Science Week or Book Week in association with World Book day.

All Adventures in Learning are underpinned by KIT’s 3-part Theory of Change:

**DISRUPTION** > creates new learning environment > engages pupils with mission

**MISSION** > gives context curriculum learning > gives pupils agency over outcome

**ACHIEVEMENT** > pupils see the outcome of their actions > self-esteem and wider relationship to learning boosted
KIT is committed to delivering work to young people in the UK where need is greatest. We know that for many young people, school represents their best opportunity for creative and cultural experiences, and so we focus our work in schools.

“As a result of KIT’s Inspiration Days and the long lasting impact they have on the pupils, we have begun to redesign our curriculum alongside KIT to ensure that teachers are using the skills, modelled so superbly by KIT, to create memorable learning for children in everyday lessons - bringing the wonder and magic into the classroom with greater regularity”.

Lauren Nash, Year 5 teacher and Curriculum Lead, Lady Margaret Primary School

‘A fantastic day very much enjoyed by all, yet also educational and informative. Thank you.’
Ms Coleman, Lady Margaret Primary School, Y3

‘I always receive excellent communication from KIT and delivery is amazing. Can’t recommend highly enough.’
Tracy Gravely, Northwick Park Primary School, Y2

‘The best bit of the day was the way the actors responded to the needs of the children... this was an amazing experience for the children and one which they will talk about and remember for a long time. Thank you!’
Liz Harrison, St Peters (Bury), Nursery

‘As a school we love this workshop and it always makes such a big impression on the kids. It's an absolutely genius idea and leaves both the staff and pupils amazed!’
Sophie Lenton, UCS Pre-Prep, Y1

‘The ban on the stories came as an utter shock to the children and they all were unable to accept that how stories can be completed eradicated. They had very clear understanding about the importance of the stories and they all were determined to save the stories’
Tasleem Kausar, Gateway Free, Y3

‘The finale was a moment of teaching to treasure.’
Sarah Jones, Tilbury Pioneer
Actors delivering KIT’s immersive work

At KIT, we have a strong community of talented and dedicated freelance actors who deliver the work in schools.

We have created an example job description below to help actors understand the qualities and skills generally required for the role. We are also providing a quality framework table that will explore these qualities in more detail. We hope that these resources will support actors to apply for immersive roles but will also provide a foundation for new and developing actors to work towards. KIT is committed to offering work to developing actors and will provide training for the right candidates who may not have all the skills required for a role.

1. Example job description

Essential skills and experience
- Experience of working with primary school aged children
- Experience performing in front of an audience (e.g. acting, public speaking)
- Interest in using immersive theatre techniques to excite and engage children
- Passion for bringing creative work into schools

Desirable skills and experience
- Experience of working with teachers and schools
- Knowledge of the arts education sector

2. Quality Framework Table

Qualities and Skills of a successful immersive performer in a primary learning environment

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Open - willingness to see children as people with independent thoughts/ideas/agency | - In-character facilitation skills:  
- The ability to keep control without breaking character, using voice modulation etc to keep attention. | - Confidence and enjoying improvising - humour | - Confident singers/musical, dancer/have a sense of rhythm |
| - Versatility/flexibility  
- Ability to work on own initiative  
- Confident to maintain overall structure while being able to respond to sudden schedule changes (fire alarms, music lessons etc) and also to go with kids'/teachers' down tangents of interest. | - **Discipline** the ability to own the space, performers need to come across as a someone pupils need to respect/listen to  
- **Learn tips from teacher**  
Watching how the teacher gets everyones' attention [IE - hand in the air saying “see me” or “counting down from 5” and then practise learning the same method in character, clowning around etc, trying it out/getting it wrong but ultimately being able to use it. In general, don’t use these techniques automatically without introducing it this way as that breaks the narrative frame. | Optional superpower…  
- A skill such as singing, beat-boxing, magic, juggling which can be explored in rehearsal. | |
| - Ability to stay in character the whole time (avoiding inventing too many hard-to-remember personal facts)  
- ability to go off script while maintaining character and storyline. | - Curiosity. Excited to learn and interested in learning and sharing knowledge. | - Ability to be silly - Interest in clown/clowning - be in touch with your natural/internal clown.  
*Occasional roles are more serious and will be explored in rehearsal.*) | |
| -Ability to be an ambassador for Arts Organisation (liaising with teacher out of character when teachers aren’t around.) You’re /performer - you as a leader interacting with teachers/face of KIT in a different way/educator  
-Generosity. | -Ability to be collaborative with other performers, stage managers, teachers, children and work in a team | -Openness/owning imperfections |
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| -Compassion/empathy | -Strong physicality and some knowledge of this approach | -Relish Improvising your way out of trouble…  
-Confidence that you won’t be caught out - prepare a little booklet about different topics but you also don’t HAVE to know everything - “wow, I came to the right place.. You know more than me!” | |
| -Understanding the difference of working with different age groups - what are the needs and limits of working with Reception pupils vs YR 4 etc. (KIT to create a document about this - scaffolding) | | -Humility - not have an ego and beat the children |
Introduction to life in a school

Here we want to give you an overview of how a typical state primary school operates to help you navigate school life as an actor.

1. School staff

Schools can vary in size from 2 form entry (2 classes per year group) to 5 form entry (5 classes per year group) and there are approximately 30 pupils per class. This means that some schools in the UK have more than 1,000 pupils and 50 teachers and staff working in them.

Below are a list of key staff that you may come across as an actor working in a school:

- **Headteacher or Executive Headteacher**: head of the school
- **Deputy Headteacher**: works closely with the headteacher
- **Class teachers and TAs**: each class will have its own teacher and approx. 2 support staff. You will be introduced to the appropriate teacher for the class you’ll be working with
- **Reception/office staff**: you will come across these members of staff when you first arrive and they will ask you to sign in and check your DBS documentation. They are also good points of contact for any questions you may have during the day/week
- **Site Manager**: looks after the building and school grounds

You will be linked to a key member of staff who will be your main point of contact. You will also have a key contact at KIT and you can call them if you need to during the day.

2. School timetable

Below are some notable activities that will usually be included in a school timetable:

- **Assembly**: usually takes place once or twice a week and is whole school or broken down into year groups of key stages
- **Class times**: teaching times in the classroom
- **Breaks and lunch**: may be whole school or broken down into year groups of key stages
- **PPA**: time for teachers to prepare for their lessons
- **Start and end times of the day**: these can vary between schools

  - Key contacts - you will have a key contact at the school (usually the teacher who’s class you’ll be working with) and a KIT contact should you need one on the day
  - Context - a school is a very busy environment with lots of other activities taking place at the same time.
3. **Etiquette**

Every school is different and worth taking time trying to understand the culture of a school from your key contact and making your own observations around the school, but some general principles to follow:

- The school will expect you to act professionally at all times
- No swearing
- No mobile phone use outside the staff room
- Always allow enough time to arrive at the school (sometimes it can take some time to check in at reception)
- Treat everyone with respect and kindness

4. **Safeguarding**

To work in a school environment is to work with young people who need to be cared for at the highest level and there are many protections and policies in place to ensure that this takes place.

**DBS**

As an actor working in a school, you will be required to undertake a DBS check, organised through KIT. A DBS check is a record of a person's criminal convictions and cautions – carried out by the Disclosure and Barring Service.

**Safeguarding Policy**

You will also be asked to read KIT’s Safeguarding Policy which details its approach to working with young people and how to report any child protection concerns at a school. KIT will also provide training on this policy to ensure that every actor understands its components and what’s asked of them within it.

The school will also have its own safeguarding policy and procedures in place and you must adhere to these as well as KIT’s policy.
Useful scenarios

Below are some examples of situations that have arisen in a school in past KIT projects. We have provided some suggested techniques and methods for dealing with these suggestions, in collaboration with our performer team.

1. Pupils

Scenario 1
You are informed on the morning of a session that there are two children who are refugees and have recently arrived in the UK. They speak very little or no English. How do you ensure they can be involved throughout the day?

Suggested techniques/methods
- KIT will always try to identify pupils with additional needs when planning work with schools, but this isn’t always possible
- Talk to the teacher to understand their methods for supporting the children and build on those where possible
- Employ more physical performance where appropriate
- Use more physical/visual communication e.g. thumbs up, smiles
- Are there any visual prompts that could be used in the session to help explain?
- If appropriate try to work 1:1 with them
- Encourage them to write in their own language or draw
- Is there an opportunity to look up some words in their language? And teach the rest of the class some of those words?
- Try not to be discouraged that they may not understand everything that is happening, the key point here is to help them join in when possible and feel comfortable.

Scenario 2
At one point in the day, a child or children are openly frightened by the story of the adventure. They become emotional and are worried about joining in. How do you respond to their fears and reassure them?

Suggested techniques/methods
- Try not to break character/story and tell them that it isn’t real - acknowledge/address their feelings but reassure them that everything is going to be okay.
- Depending on the experience try to workshop through the problem e.g. the Alien character was more scared than you and we need to help the alien. Try to bring out the child’s empathy. The Alien character can use their physicality to show that they are scared.
- Consider if the child can help you with something - this could be a special mission just for them or holding a prop for you. Having an additional purpose/role can sometimes comfort a child in this situation.
- Bring in a teacher or teaching assistant to reassure the child or ask a teacher’s advice.
- Always give children the opportunity to revisit the room/character they were frightened of.
- Appropriate for the character to get in touch with them afterwards? Note through teacher or email?
- If the above is unsuccessful, work with the teacher to decide if it should be explained to the child that the character is a performance and if needed arrange for the teacher to find a space alone with the child.
- Check with the teacher that the child is okay, and back it up with 1:1 with the character if needed.
- Explore using different levels of intrigue/drama with different age groups. Listen to the room.

Scenario 3
Throughout the day you experience a core group of confident children who will always contribute. How do you include children who might be less confident to engage?
Suggested techniques/methods
- Talk to the teacher at the beginning of the day and explain that this is a different type of day that might really benefit children that aren't normally as active in the class so they might want to pick them to speak up
- Encourage quieter children to speak up and show that you’re interested in what they have to say
- Work in smaller groups or 1:1 and encourage the sharing of ideas with the whole class
- Work in non verbal ways
- Suggest using the teacher as someone who can pick different children to raise their hands

Scenario 4
You are told that a child with additional needs in the class will likely find the disruption of a normal day quite challenging. What do you need to be aware of and how might you plan to ease the stress around this?

Suggested techniques/methods
- Speak to the teacher beforehand to better understand the child’s needs - any specific triggers, finding out if there is anything they really like.
- KIT will also highlight any children with additional needs in planning and provide guidance
- Introduce yourself 1:1 to the child
- Clarity of communication - be as clear as possible about what you are going to do and when
- Be ready for unexpected behaviors and responses
- Acknowledge children who are really excited by you/the character - giving them a special role to make them focus in on. ‘Yes and’ approach
- If child is struggling to engage or is becoming frustrated/upset, make it easy for them to leave the space/classroom but also make it clear that they are welcome back. Always communicate with a teacher if a child needs to leave a situation

Scenario 5: A child makes a statement which goes against your (and KIT’s) values. How do you respond?

Suggested techniques/methods
- If the statement is concerning from a child protection perspective, you should report it to KIT and the Safeguarding manager or key contact at the school immediately
- Share with another actor/stage manager at the school if you need support
- If the statement was said publicly in a classroom or assembly you could keep it short and say “I’m not sure about that” or “I don’t agree with that” and move on. If appropriate, you could lightly challenge “why do you think that” but you must judge the situation sensitively.
- Suggest to the teacher later on that they may want to discuss further with them
- You will not always work with people who share yours or KIT’s values, but we can treat those people with the respect that we think everyone deserves

- One of the pupils you’re working with is questioning the authenticity of the experience and is telling the rest of the class that you are ‘fake’
- You arrive at the school and the teacher who’s class you’re working with is ill and no-one seems to know anything about the project. Who do you talk to / contact?
- What do you do if a pupil sees you outside the school and you’re not in character?
2. Teachers

Scenario 6
A Teacher (or TA) is disciplining their class for engaging with your work in a positive and excited manner. How do you respond?

Suggested techniques/methods
- Talk to the teacher in advance and prepare them for the day, including that the classroom might become animated and that you’re okay with that
- Bring the teacher in - give them a job or role to help them feel connected to the work
- Voice how you feel about the children acting in different ways/celebrating that in front of the teacher but try not to undermine the teacher at the same time. This is a delicate balance.
- Redirect the energy rather than shutting it down, find a way of channeling the excitement into a task or conversation
- If the intervention is needed then thank the teacher

Scenario 7
A pupil asks a question about a topic which you don’t know the answer to but which your character is supposed to know about e.g. a question about a dinosaur to a paleontologist character. How do you respond while staying in character?

Suggested techniques/methods
- Don’t let it panic you
- Permission to acknowledge that adults don’t know everything and will need to look it up. Bring the children in to your research into the answer. This is good modelling for learning.
- Play with it - “I should know that, why don’t I know that…!”
- Space for imaginative plan - inventing answers if appropriate
- Ask the teachers to be sounding board - not that you can always make that happen but the teacher could play a role as a research assistant etc. Finding out information and answers on the whiteboard.
- Creating a dramatic narrative out of being a bit caught out - ‘of course I know the answer to that but do you know?’ ‘are you a spy who has been sent here to test me?’ Briefly answer the question but then ask a teacher if they can bring up any images to help the children.
- Distraction tactics - Oh we’re studying that, let me call the university to see what they have to say...
- Always useful to have some information on the topic so good to read up a little beforehand
- Always build up the character/Work out what type of character you are in rehearsal, are you someone who doesn't know, to arrogant to even answer...

Scenario 8  
You are in the staffroom and you hear a group of TA's talking about groups of children in a mildly derogatory manner – moaning rather than being abusive. What do you do?

Suggested techniques/methods
- Let them have their moan/vent, the staff room is a safe space for school staff
- Say something positive as a counter
- If there is something that their class has picked up in a different way or quickly, it's nice to mention that - positive reinforcement
- Reinforce the way that we aid teaching, highlight different ways of teaching and engagement
- If there is a direct safeguarding issue flag it to KIT HQ.

Scenario 9  
You are teaching/introducing a writing section to a class group and you see in the corner of your eye that the teacher is looking a little agitated. How do you respond?

Suggested techniques/methods
- Ask if the teacher has something they would like to add
- In character, ask the teacher if you’re explaining it correctly, you’re not used to introducing writing work
- Try and give them a task/something to think about while you have a chance to talk to the teacher 1:1
- For KIT to check in with the teacher before the session to see if they want to lead the writing task or do they want us to lead it
Scenario 10
You arrive at school on the morning of the adventure and find that the expected teacher isn’t there – there is a replacement instead. It’s a non-Stage Manager project - how do you help them prepare?

Suggested techniques/methods
- Give the replacement an overview of the whole day and give them all the technical information they need for when we need them to step in etc, make them feel at ease, going to help their day
- Break it into sections, up until break this is what's happening, then check in again to tell them what's going to happen until lunch etc.
- Share the schedule/resources
- Offer to put them in touch with staff at KIT

Scenario 11
During the course of the day, teachers or TAs persistently break the fiction of the world by asking logistical questions about timetable etc in earshot of pupils. How do you respond to this?

Suggested techniques/methods
- Stay in character and explain you’re not sure about timetable matters. Refer them to the stage manager if there is one there
- Politely explain at break time/staff room that you’re not able to answer logistical questions around the children
- If a child ask if we are the people coming in for a workshop you can say ‘Oh I did see someone in the staffroom but I don’t really know about that, we’ve replaced them anyway because this is much more important…!’

Scenario 12
The teacher is not engaging with the work at all, they are sitting at the back of the classroom talking and marking.

- Try to engage with the teacher, asking them for a little bit of help, give them a specific role
- Put the teacher on the spot, ask them who we should hear from next, ask what their opinion is on something
- Use the fictional persona to get the teacher doing what you need
- Having a chat with the teacher to tell them we welcome their contribution, they can get involved and want them to get involved.
Scenario 13
None of the tools you’ve used in the past are working in trying to discipline a class. What else can you try?

- Learning and adopting the school discipline techniques can be really useful. Observe the teachers as much as possible and adopt their methods, the children will be used to them and will be extremely effective.
- Body percussion to get children’s attention - focus the pupils on you
- Over excited - physically lower yourself to their level, take a deep breath etc,
- Inclusive games
- Megaphone - can sometimes be harder to hear and gets children more excited. Use as an initial tool to get everyone’s attention
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- Generosity.

- Ability to be collaborative with other performers, stage managers, teachers, children and work in a team
- Openness/owning imperfections

- Compassion/empathy

- Strong physicality and some knowledge of this approach
- Relish Improvising your way out of trouble…
- Confidence that you won’t be caught out - prepare a little booklet about different topics but you also don’t HAVE to know everything - “wow, I came to the right place.. You know more than me!”

- Understanding the difference of working with different age groups - what are the needs and limits of working with Reception pupils vs

- Humility - not have an ego and beat the children
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