**The Croft – Education Pack**

**Introduction**

* **Play Overview**: *The Croft* is a haunting thriller set in the Scottish Highlands. It interweaves past and present, exploring themes of love, loss, identity, and the weight of history. Based loosely on true events, the play takes audiences on a chilling journey into the dark secrets of Coille Ghillie, a deserted village.
* **Target Audience**: Recommended for ages 13+ due to its themes of grief, death, strong language and brief depictions of violence.

**About the Play**

* **Setting and Inspiration**:
  + Loosely inspired by events in the real-life village of Coille Ghillie, known for its remote location and abandoned crofters' huts.
  + Explores the cultural and historical significance of crofting life in Scotland, with references to the Clearances and the impacts of famine.
* **Director’s Vision**:
  + Directed by Alastair Whatley (*Birdsong*), the play emphasizes the interplay between memory and identity, hauntingly brought to life on stage.
* **Themes**:
  + Isolation and the power of place.
  + Historical injustices and their impact on individuals and communities.
  + Familial relationships and reconciliation.

**Educational Activities**

1. **Historical Research Project**:
   * Research the Scottish Highlands, focusing on crofting villages and the Clearances.
   * Create a timeline showing the impact of the Clearances on local populations.
2. **Creative Writing**:
   * Write a monologue for one of the historical characters in *The Croft*, such as Eilene or Enid, exploring their story.
3. **Drama Workshop**:
   * Recreate a key scene from the play (e.g., the interaction between David and Laura) and discuss the characters’ motivations and emotions.
   * Experiment with lighting and sound to create suspense and atmosphere.
4. **Debate and Discussion**:
   * “The impact of history on the present cannot be ignored.” Discuss this statement in the context of *The Croft*.
   * Explore how isolation influences the characters’ decisions.
5. **Thematic Analysis**:
   * Examine how the play uses the supernatural to explore themes of grief and memory.
   * Discuss the significance of symbols in the play (e.g., the candle, the dust by the door).

**Zoom with Director Alastair Whatley**

* **Free Zoom Session**:
  + An exclusive opportunity for students to engage with Alastair Whatley. Topics include:
    - Directing choices and challenges.
    - Insights into the play’s themes and design elements.
    - A Q&A session for students to ask their questions.

**Resources**

1. **Script Extracts**:
   * Use the provided excerpts from Act 1 and Act 2 to analyze dialogue and character development.
2. **Critical Reviews**:
   * Analyse reviews from *The Guardian*, *Broadway World*, and others to explore audience reactions and interpretations.
3. **Glossary of Terms**:
   * Definitions of crofting, Clearances, and other key historical and cultural terms.

**Learning Outcomes**

* Students will:
  + Develop an understanding of how history and location shape dramatic narratives.
  + Explore character development and thematic depth through performance and analysis.
  + Gain insight into the director’s creative process.

**BACKGROUND**

**The History of Crofts and the Highland Clearances**

**What is a Croft?**

A croft is a small agricultural holding, typically located in the Scottish Highlands and Islands. Historically, crofts were used for subsistence farming, where families relied on small plots of land to grow food and keep livestock. Crofters rented their land from landowners (lairds) and often had minimal rights, leaving them vulnerable to changes in land use and ownership.

Crofting communities were tightly-knit, with a deep connection to the land, their ancestors, and cultural traditions, including Gaelic language and music.

**The Highland Clearances**

The Highland Clearances refer to a series of forced evictions that occurred primarily in the 18th and 19th centuries in Scotland. These evictions were driven by economic changes and a shift toward sheep farming, which landowners deemed more profitable than maintaining crofting tenants.

**Key Events and Impact:**

* **Economic Shift**: With the Industrial Revolution and the rise of sheep farming, landlords began displacing crofting communities to make way for large-scale sheep pastures.
* **Forced Evictions**: Crofters were forcibly removed from their homes, often violently, with homes burned to prevent return.
* **Emigration**: Many evicted families emigrated to North America, Australia, and New Zealand in search of a better life, while others moved to urban centres or to the coast to become fishermen.
* **Cultural Loss**: The Clearances resulted in the loss of Gaelic traditions, language, and community as crofting life disintegrated.

**Coille Ghillie and the Clearances**

In *The Croft*, the setting of Coille Ghillie is deeply rooted in this history. The play refers to the Clearances as a traumatic event that forever altered the landscape and communities of the Highlands. The themes of abandonment and survival resonate with the real stories of crofters who were forced to leave their ancestral homes.

**The Location: Scottish Highlands**

**About**

The play is set in the village of Coille Ghillie near the Applecross peninsula in the Scottish Highlands. Applecross, known in Gaelic as "A’ Chomraich" (meaning “The Sanctuary”), is a secluded area steeped in natural beauty and history. The region is known for its rugged landscapes, dramatic coastline, and rich Gaelic heritage.

**The Landscape**

* **Desolation and Beauty**: Applecross is accessible only by one of two routes: the winding coastal road or the Bealach na Bà (Pass of the Cattle), a single-track road that climbs sharply to over 2,000 feet. The dramatic ascent offers sweeping views of the Highlands but reinforces the area's sense of isolation.
* **Crofters' Villages**: Like Coille Ghillie in *The Croft*, many villages on the Applecross peninsula were once home to thriving crofting communities. These settlements are now largely deserted, leaving behind stone ruins, echoes of lives past, and an eerie connection to history.

**Coille Ghillie and its Roots**

In the play, Coille Ghillie is described as a 2km hike from the nearest road, along an ancient famine path known locally as a "desolation road" or "hunger road." These roads were built during the Highland Clearances and the accompanying famines, often as part of relief work schemes for displaced crofters.

* **The Crofters' Hut**: At the heart of *The Croft* is a former crofter's hut, described as a mix of corrugated iron and stone, bearing the marks of time and hardship. It becomes a character in itself, symbolising the fragility and endurance of life in the Highlands.
* **Ruins of the Past**: The hut is built on the remains of older structures, hinting at the layered history of the land and the lives that were lived—and lost—there.

**Cultural and Historical Significance**

* **Gaelic Traditions**: Applecross is one of the last strongholds of Gaelic culture. The play reflects this through the references to songs, curses, and rituals, such as the lighting of the candle to ward off spirits.
* **Isolation and Resilience**: The Applecross peninsula, like Coille Ghillie, evokes a deep sense of isolation. Cut off from the modern world, the characters must face not only their own emotions but also the echoes of a traumatic past embedded in the land.

**Scottish Folklore and Superstitions**

**Candle Lighting to Ward Off Spirits**

One of the central rituals mentioned in *The Croft* is the lighting of a candle at dusk to signal the presence of the living and to ward off spirits. This practice draws on ancient Scottish beliefs about the thin veil between the living and the dead, particularly in isolated, mystical places like the Highlands. Candles are often used in Scottish folklore during times of transition, such as dusk, to protect against unseen forces.

**The Role of Spirits and the “Second Sight”**

In Scottish folklore, the Highlands are thought to be a place where the boundary between the physical and spiritual worlds is particularly thin. People with the "second sight," or the ability to see into the spirit world, were believed to be common in crofting communities. These individuals, known as *seers*, were both respected and feared for their ability to predict death or disaster.

**The Curse (Mallachd)**

Curses, such as the Gaelic curse chanted by Enid in the play, have deep roots in Scottish folklore. A curse was often used as a form of protection or retribution, especially in times of injustice. In the play, Enid’s curse adds a layer of mystery and dread, reflecting the Highland belief that spoken words carry great power, particularly when uttered in anger or grief.

**Threshold Superstitions**

The practice of laying red dust under the lintel of a door, as referenced in *The Croft*, was another protective measure in Scottish folklore. Thresholds were considered liminal spaces—places of transition that spirits could cross if not properly guarded. Spreading a protective substance, such as red ochre or brick dust, was believed to keep out malevolent forces, both human and supernatural.

**Selkies and Shape-shifters**

While not directly referenced in *The Croft*, selkies (seal people) are a prominent feature of Scottish folklore, particularly in coastal communities. Selkies were said to shed their sealskin to take human form, symbolizing the connection between humans and nature. These stories often highlight themes of love, loss, and longing, which resonate with the emotional core of the play.

**The Wailing of the Banshee**

The sound of wailing, such as the cries outside the hut in *The Croft*, may evoke the legend of the banshee. In Scottish and Irish folklore, the banshee was said to foretell death through her mournful cries. This eerie presence underscores the play's themes of grief and impending tragedy.

**The Highlands as a “Thin Place”**

The concept of “thin places” is deeply rooted in Celtic tradition. These are locations where the boundary between the physical and spiritual worlds feels especially permeable, allowing for encounters with the otherworldly. The Highlands, with their vast wilderness and ancient history, are often regarded as such places. In *The Croft*, Coille Ghillie embodies this idea, with its ruins, spectral figures, and haunting atmosphere.

**Importance of Ancestral Ties**

Scottish folklore emphasizes the importance of honouring ancestors. The land is believed to carry the memories of those who lived before, and neglecting these spirits could bring misfortune. This belief ties closely to *The Croft*, where the characters grapple with the echoes of the past and the unspoken stories of those who came before them.

**Other Highland Superstitions**

* **The Rowan Tree**: Often planted near homes, rowan trees were thought to protect against witches and evil spirits. Branches might also be hung above doorways for protection.
* **Salt and Water**: These elements were used in rituals to purify spaces or protect against supernatural forces.
* **Spirits of the Sea**: Coastal communities believed in sea spirits that could bring good fortune or disaster, depending on how they were treated.