The Anatomy Lesson

A blackbox larp for 10–20 people, written by Mo Holkar.

Introduction

You will read this out at the start of the pre-larp briefing, and you can also use it for publicizing the larp to prospective participants.

The year is 1632: the place, Amsterdam. Aris Kindt, a desperate violent criminal, mugs a passer-by in an attempt to steal their valuable cloak. Kindt is arrested, tried, and swiftly executed by hanging. Later that same day, Kindt's body is publicly dissected by Dr Nicolaes Tulp, the official city anatomist. The young Rembrandt van Rijn paints a picture of the scene, which will later be recognized as an early masterpiece.

The Anatomy Lesson *plays through this sequence of events eight times. Each run-through lasts 10–15 minutes, and is made up of three short scenes: the mugging and arrest, the trial and execution, and the dissection and painting. The scenes are set to music and are non-verbal. In each run-through, each participant will play a different role in the story.*

What you'll need

10–20 participants. It can be run with less than 10, down to 5 or so – and that's still fun, but it becomes a rather different experience. All participants should be in just plain clothes: there is no costume.

3 hours, or a bit less if you have fewer people.

A room that, ideally, is large enough to set up the three scenes separately in different places, so that participants can move between them as required during play. If you don't have that much space, then you'll need to change the scenography between the three scenes as they take place.

There should also be an offgame space, including a table, to one side of the room. People can put coats, bags, water bottles, etc, under this table.

As many name badges as you have participants. 20 badges are included here (on pages 14–16) – see page 11 for details of which are the ones that you should use, and which omit, if you have less than 20 participants.

A chair for everyone, and 4–6 tables (depending on your numbers).

A system that can play sound throughout the space.

Ideally, a lighting system that can provide different lighting for each of the three scenes – in different parts of the room, if it's big enough.

Setup of the three areas

Scene 1 – market – warm yellowish light – table(s) set out as market stalls, with plenty of space for people to throng and mingle around and between.

Scene 2 – courtroom – cold blueish light – table for the judge to sit behind.

Scene 3 – dissection – infernal reddish light – table in the middle for the body.

You want to be able to fade these three lighting areas up and down independently, such that only the current scene is lit. At the end of the scene, cross-fade the lights to lead the participants to the location of the next scene.

Explaining the larp

Read out the **Introduction,** above.

Say that you're going to explain first the **basics of the larp,** and then pause for questions: then you'll go on to the details of exactly **how it's going to work,** and then pause for questions again. So, if people have questions that come up in their minds while you're talking, they should please **keep them until the pauses.**

Say that after the explanations and a brief preparatory workshop, there'll be a **break of ten minutes** before the larp starts, to allow people to use the bathroom, drink water, etc. Once the larp starts it will play through continuously for **about two hours.**

Safety

Tell people that **The Door is Open** – they can leave the larp at any time, for any reason. They needn't worry that doing so will harm other people's experience – it will be fine. They should tell you that they're leaving, so you

can adjust the character numbers: but they don't need to explain why, unless they wish to.

If anyone needs to pause or stop the larp for any reason, they should say out loud **'Offgame'.** Everyone should stop, and the person should then explain what it is that they want or need, if they're able to.

By default this larp includes some **touch** – holding another person's shoulder or arm, plus of course some dissection which should avoid the 'swimsuit area' – you can avoid that by not choosing to play the role of the dissection subject. If you don't want to be touched at all, please **say so now.** And if someone forgets that in the heat of the moment, **make an X** with your forearms to remind them (or use **'Offgame').**

Tell them that for safety reasons and also for a better visual look, any 'action' sequences should be played out in **slow motion.**

Practicalities of play

Explain that the larp is **non-verbal** and participants should be silent during play, but it's not that they are playing beings whose existence actually is silent – rather, it's a kind of **silent-movie silent.** So miming calling for help, etc, is absolutely fine. (They should not, though, use charades etc to try and communicate meaning to each other. Just ordinary exaggerated gestures and miming.)

Any participant can play any role: they are **not gendered.** This is not intended to be historically accurate to the 17th-century Dutch Republic in any sense at all.

[Pause here for questions about what's been said so far, first reminding them that you'll be talking next about the details of the larp structure.]

Larp structure

Tell the participants that they don't need to remember any of the larp structure etc in detail – **you will remind them** before the start of play, and at intervals during it if needed. This is now just to give them a general idea of what's going to be happening.

Name badges and roles

Tell the participants that, for each of the eight run-throughs, they will choose **a different name badge** from those available. There are as many name badges as there are participants.

[Show an example name badge.] It has written on it a **specified role,** in bold, for one of the three scenes: and for the other two, it says 'Generic'. They are all like this. So, in one scene you will be **focal to the story:** in the other two scenes, you will be playing more of a **supporting role.** You can choose for yourself what that generic role might be: someone who will fit into the setting of the scene.

So, for example, in the first run-through, one participant might be playing **Kindt's victim** in the first scene, a generic court official in the second, and a generic audience member in the third. In the second run-through they take a different name badge and so might be playing a generic bystander at the mugging, a generic assistant at the execution, and **Kindt's corpse** as it is dissected.

Each participant wears prominently the badge that they have chosen. This allows everyone to see **who is playing the key figures** in each scene, without needing to coordinate verbally. At the end of the sequence of three scenes, during the offgame interlude, everyone returns their badge to the offgame table. They then **choose a different badge,** with a different specified role, for the next run-through. (If they're slow to choose, and the only ones left are ones that they've already used, then they should get someone to swap.)

Scene transitions

The three scenes that make up each run-through ideally take place in three different parts of the room, each of which is laid out with a different arrangement of tables/chairs/etc, and is lit differently, as described above. Point these areas out to the participants, and tell them if they will need to move furniture etc if you didn't have enough space to set the three scenes up separately.

At the end of each of the three scenes, the music for that scene finishes, and **two series of bells will ring.** When the first bells ring, the participants should **freeze into a tableau,** as if they were being painted as a group. They should hold the tableau until the second set of bells have rung – about ten seconds.

Of course, they don't have to be absolutely as still as statues – especially if they have ended the scene in an awkward or unbalanced position – **be safe and comfortable,** is the priority.

Between the first and second scenes of the three, and the second and third, after the bells there will then be about 20 seconds for people to **move (still in silence) to the next scene,** which they should start when its music starts.

And after the third scene, the second bells start a **brief offgame interlude** before the start of the next run-through, when they will choose new badges.

Playing out the scenes

Make it clear that the eight run-throughs **can and should differ** in detail of what happens, as the participants improvise. This is not a larp where successive run-throughs are intended to be similar/repetitive. But of course the **overall general story** must be the same: the mugging and arrest, the trial and execution, the dissection and painting. They must establish the narrative **communally during play,** without preceding discussion or any other kind of negotiation etc.

Tell them that they will get a **practice run-through** of the three-scene sequence, at the end of the workshops. For this, they will be wearing the same name badges that they will be wearing for the first proper run-through once the larp starts. This practice run has a **voiceover,** setting the scene and suggesting events. It's to help them **time the scene** to the length of the music. Important to stress that they should hear the voiceover, then enact (something like) it – not try and enact it while it's talking.

Tell them not to worry about precisely timing their actions to the voiceover – that is not what is intended – it's just meant as a **guide** as to how the story should unfold over the actual length of the piece of music that soundtracks the scene – which in each case is about **three and a half minutes.**

[Pause here for questions about any of this.]

They may ask you questions like "Is it ok for us to silently indicate to each other at the start of each scene who has the main roles?" or "Can we do the execution in a different way?", etc. The question really is "will it break the larp design intention if we do some meta thing around how we develop it together?" And the answer should be that **yes that's absolutely fine** (unless it really would break the larp, of course).

Part of the point of the design is seeing what kind of meta things this group will **evolve together spontaneously,** without having been prompted: and how they change and develop from run-through to run-through. But don't tell them that: just be neutrally supportive and make it clear that you will **not be hands-on** during play. Tell them that it will be their larp experience, not yours: they will **develop trust in each other through play,** and will use that to enrich and deepen the story. You will just be observing interestedly.

Character embodiment workshop

You can omit this if you don't have time, or if you don't think the participants will benefit from it. But it can be quite useful in helping to **prepare people for the larp** that's about to come.

Get the participants to clear the chairs to the side, so the main floor area is empty. Have them **walk around a little,** shaking out their bodies, getting loose.

Stop them moving: they should now be **scattered fairly randomly** about the space. Anyone who's not able to stand up for a few minutes can do this next bit in a chair.

Ask them to **close their eyes.** Tell them that, during the larp, they're going to be playing a **different character in each scene** – and, without the use of speech, it will be their physicality that makes these characters feel and appear different from one another.

Talk them through the exercise, something like this:

"Think about your body, as you stand. Feel how your weight moves downwards, from your head, down through your neck and shoulders, through your hips, down through your legs to the floor. How are your feet standing on the ground? – how is your weight spread between them? Shift weight slowly and gently from one side to the other, then backwards and forwards, without moving your feet from the floor. Turn your shoulders slowly from side to side, letting your arms swing loose. Tilt your head from side to side, and turn your neck from one side to the other."

"Now think about someone different from you. How do they hold their head? Where are their arms? Are their legs locked straight, or relaxed? What shape does their body present, when they're being painted?"

"Open your eyes. Gradually start moving as that other person. Don't catch the eyes of the others around you, just avoid them as you move. How does your person walk? Where do they look? How do their arms move, or not move? *[Let them walk for a bit.]* Then ask yourself: why is this person like this? What has happened, or is happening, in their life, that makes them hold themselves in this way, walk in this way?"

"Start to notice the other people around you. Who do you think they are, from the ways that they're moving? Nod to them, or make some other small gesture of greeting, as you pass each other."

"Slow down, stop, and close your eyes again. Now it's time to create a new person – the same way – but someone who holds themselves differently again. *[Give them time as before.]* And now open your eyes and start moving, as before." *[Basically repeat the exercise.]*

Give them a moment to **calm back down,** and say that now it's time to practice a run-through of the three scenes. After that, there'll be a break of ten minutes: and then it'll be time to start the larp.

Practice run-through

Spread the name badges out on the offgame table. Invite the participants to **each choose one,** and to be familiar with who they will be playing in each scene. Get the tables and lighting set up as necessary for the three scenes, if you haven't done that already.

Get **everyone into position** for the first scene, with the lighting ready. Tell them that when the music starts, the scene is live. Remind them that there is a voiceover this time – they should listen to what it's saying, but not be bound by it – it is a guide for length, not a specific set of instructions. Remind them to **freeze into a tableau** at the first bells at the end of the scene, and hold it until the second bells. Then, to move to the next scene, and wait for the next music to start. Remind them that they can **create their characters' physicality** using the techniques just now workshopped. Remind them that the general safety word is **'Offgame'.**

Be prepared to **pause the run-through** as required for questions, or to correct the participants if they're going wildly wrong. And remind them about not dissecting the swimsuit area, etc, as needed.

After this full run-through practice, tell them to **keep the badges,** so they can play the same roles again in the first real run-through during the larp.

If it seems like they need reassurance, tell them that this run-through was the **most awkward and uncomfortable** that it will be. Each successive run-through during the larp will be easier and more fluid, as they get into it.

Ask for questions, and then take a **ten-minute break.**

Preparing for the start of the larp

When the participants come back after the break, ask them if they would like to do the first real run-through **also with the voiceover version,** or if they're confident enough to go ahead just with the music. (Usually they will want to have the voiceover again, and that's fine.)

Put a printout of the **text of the voiceover** (pages 12–13 below) on the offgame table, and tell them that they can refer to it between run-throughs if they want to remind themselves. But to remember that it is a suggestion, not a set of commands.

Say that there will inevitably be **timing issues,** doing things too quickly or too slowly; or forgetting things. That is all absolutely fine – just go with it. It will all get easier as they go along. If they are about to finish the scene's action before the end of the music, they can **spin it out** to fill up the time. Or if the music ends while there's still action to complete, they can **rush it.** That is all ok – they should lean into it.

They are now ready to **start the larp.**

During the larp

Your job is pretty much just to observe, to **start the soundtrack** for each run-through, and to **fade the lights** up and down for the three scenes as required. And to **keep count** so that there are eight run-throughs, not more or fewer!

For the first couple of times, if necessary, you can use the offgame break between run-throughs to **remind them of aspects of the larp** – perhaps the safety words, or to stay frozen between the two sets of bells, or to switch badges if there aren't any left that you haven't already had. You might also want to tell them **how many run-throughs** there have so far been – or perhaps just at halfway and again before the last one.

If people want to take a bit longer **break at halfway,** after the fourth run-through, for biological needs, then that's ok – but it shouldn't be longer than a few minutes, or they will be in danger of **losing the flow** of the larp.

After the larp

When the third scene of the eighth run-through is finished, that's the **end of the larp.** Thank the participants, and congratulate them on having completed it. Invite them to take a **five or ten-minute break** before, if they wish, reconvening to talk about what they've just experienced.

Debrief

It's suggested to start the debrief with **a round,** with each person having a minute or so to share **thoughts and feelings** if they wish, without interruption or conversation with the others. Tell them that this shouldn't be analysis of the larp design, etc – there will be time for that shortly – but just about **their personal experience.**

Once that's done and everyone's had a chance to speak, you can open up the floor for **more general conversation.** They will probably be curious about **your own experience** – what did you make of what you saw, etc. You might like to also talk a little about **the inspiration for the larp,** which is described below.

When everyone has said enough (or you're out of time) conclude with **another round of thanks.**

Inspiration

This larp was inspired by the iconic painting *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp,* which people will probably be familiar with even if they don't know it by that name. The author had a dream in which the scene that the painting depicts was live, with sombre doctors posing around a dead body while being sketched for posterity. And then on waking was prompted to look into the backstory: and it turned out that actually we know quite a bit about it.

References

Lots of details can be found here:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Anatomy_Lesson_of_Dr._Nicolaes_Tulp

and here:
https://www.executedtoday.com/2012/01/31/1632-aris-kindt-rembrandt-anatomy-lesson-dr-nicolaes-tulp/

Music

Scene 1: The Three Ravens - A 17th Century English Folk Song

Scene 2: Jakub Jósef Orlinski - Purcell - King Arthur - The Cold Song

Scene 3: The Lord Bless You and Keep You - Philippine Madrigal Singers [HQ]

Here's the whole soundtrack with voiceover:
https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/slk1f56ivtfg3z6in85zn/Anatomy_with_voiceover.mp3?rlkey=b3b0eqa6aecdajzf9tkm3voz2&st=644ihqwv&dl=0

And without voiceover:
https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/auezxcgocsw2cutyn7jnx/Anatomy_no_voiceover.mp3?rlkey=24er8v2xx3f25p455gqhthp4l&st=u65zwctp&dl=0

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Characters

If you have ten participants, use just the ten characters who are not numbered in the list below. If you have more than ten, then add in further characters in sequence by number, as required.

There are 20 name badges, below on pages 14–16: use those that correspond with the characters that you are using, one for each participant. Each badge indicates that the person is playing their specified character in one of the three scenes, and a generic character in the two other scenes.

Scene 1

- Aris Kindt
- Victim
- Constable
- 11 Shopkeeper
- 15 Entertainer
- 17 Streetwalker
- 20 Child

Scene 2

- Aris Kindt
- Judge
- Witness
- Executioner
- 13 Assistant executioner
- 16 Court usher
- 19 Reporter

Scene 3

- Aris Kindt
- Dr Nicolaes Tulp
- Rembrandt
- 12 Dr Tulp's assistant
- 14 Guest anatomist
- 18 Cleaner

Scene voiceovers

Either record or speak a voiceover of these descriptions to play over the music, during the practice run-through, to give people some guidance to get the timing right.

Scene 1

A bustling street market in Amsterdam.

Traders are selling their wares to interested customers.

Street entertainers perform,

while children scamper and play.

One of the customers is the **Victim** – they wear a fancy cloak, which they are very proud of.

Also in the market, sneaking around looking for opportunities, is **Aris Kindt,** a habitual thief.

And the **Constable** is present, too, notionally patrolling although perhaps in fact rather lazy.

The constable pays no attention to those who are offering their bodies for sale: that much is certain.

Aris Kindt entices the Victim into a secluded corner of the market. Perhaps with an offer of a tremendous bargain – or of some illicit goods.

Kindt pulls out a knife and threatens: your cloak, or your life!

There is a struggle,

the knife falls to the ground,

and the Victim calls for help.

Aris Kindt attempts to flee,

but good citizens prevent this.

Eventually the Constable triumphantly makes the arrest.

Scene 2

The court is held in a room panelled with wood, in a reverential atmosphere. The majesty of the law is in force.

An usher gets the courtroom into order,

and **Aris Kindt** is brought before the **Judge,** in manacles.

The victim of the crime is called as a **Witness,** and swears their oath.

They recount the events of the attempted robbery.

A reporter makes detailed notes of the case, for tomorrow's news-paper.

The Judge deliberates, and condemns Kindt to death by hanging.

An assistant brings Kindt to where the **Executioner** awaits, on the scaffold.

Aris Kindt is allowed the grace of a last few words to the crowd,

before the Executioner triggers the opening of the trapdoor.

Death is mercifully rapid.

Scene 3

The surgical theatre of the Anatomical Hall of Amsterdam.

Assistants prepare the dissecting table, under the supervision of **Dr Nicolaes Tulp.**

The audience gather, close and expectant.

They are a mix of diligent medical students and ghoulish onlookers.

A guest anatomist is ready to join Dr Tulp in the exercise.

Aris Kindt is brought in by an assistant, and laid out upon the table.

Rembrandt enters, and paints the scene, as Dr Tulp conducts the dissection.

A cleaner mops up around the delicate business of anatomy, while tissues and organs are exposed and examined.

As the dissection finishes, so does the painting.

1 Aris Kindt *2 (generic)* *3 (generic)*	***1 Victim*** *2 (generic)* *3 (generic)*
1 Constable *2 (generic)* *3 (generic)*	*1 (generic)* ***2 Aris Kindt*** *3 (generic)*
1 (generic) ***2 Judge*** *3 (generic)*	*1 (generic)* ***2 Witness*** *3 (generic)*
1 (generic) ***2 Executioner*** *3 (generic)*	*1 (generic)* *2 (generic)* ***3 Aris Kindt***

1 (generic) *2 (generic)* ***3 Dr Nicolaes Tulp***	*1 (generic)* *2 (generic)* ***3 Rembrandt***
1 Shopkeeper *2 (generic)* *3 (generic)*	***1 Entertainer*** *2 (generic)* *3 (generic)*
1 Streetwalker *2 (generic)* *3 (generic)*	***1 Child*** *2 (generic)* *3 (generic)*
1 (generic) ***2 Asst. executioner*** *3 (generic)*	*1 (generic)* ***2 Court usher*** *3 (generic)*

1 (generic) **2 Reporter** *3 (generic)*	*1 (generic)* *2 (generic)* **3 Dr Tulp's assistant**
1 (generic) *2 (generic)* **3 Guest anatomist**	*1 (generic)* *2 (generic)* **3 Cleaner**