

Drama for Democracy: Material Theatre

[MANJIMA CHATTERJEE](#)

SHIV NADAR SCHOOL, NOIDA

ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the importance of drama in establishing the principles of democracy in the classroom. It introduces Material Theatre as a form of theatre in education that celebrates materials—both natural and constructed—and the idea of democracy in the performance space. By way of a close look at the rationale behind Material Theatre and the ways in which it comes to be, it raises questions about the gaps that exist in the educational space under the traditional school system, and even in some of the progressive schools in India. It queries the negative attitudes that we hold against some forms of sensorial engagement while upholding others. By way of a case study, it enters a classroom which has introduced Material Theatre as a part of its curricular transactions, and documents the events that follow. It suggests that the introduction of Material Theatre in the classroom opens up possibilities of challenging the power structures in the classroom and engaging deeply with the universal ideas that sustain democracy.

Teaching and learning must be linked to the goal of educating students to take risks, to struggle with ongoing relations of power, to critically appropriate forms of knowledge that exist outside of their immediate experience, and to envisage versions of a world which is “not yet”—in order to be able to alter the grounds upon which life is lived.

- Roger I. Simon, Empowerment as a pedagogy of possibility, p. 375

The very first thing that students learn when they enter a classroom for the first time is how to negotiate with power. The structure of the classroom, with the teacher as ‘the one who knows’ and the environment that is ‘designed to teach’, places the child firmly in the position of ‘the one who must learn’. Entry into the classroom is also about entry into, what Lisa Delpit calls a culture of power: ways of talking, writing, dressing, and interacting that are handed out with an aura of ‘respectability’ (Delpit, 1988, p. 283). When a child enters the classroom, s/he faces a double-whammy of power structures—the power of the teachers over students as well as the power of shadowy authority figures who determine what is worth teaching and what one must know. Consequently, the classroom becomes, by its very design, a space to inherit power structures, not to challenge them.

Curiously, the traditional theatre space has quite a similar design, wherein the audience occupies a similar space as the student, as ‘the one who must watch and be educated’. As Augusto Boal points out in *Theatre of the Oppressed*, the theatre is meant, by design, to help the audience to accept social realities, and not to challenge them. Irrespective of the content of the play or the arrangement of seats, in traditional dramatic forms, the power structure or status quo between performer/director and audience is allowed to remain constant. In both scenarios, the thoughts and perceptions that learners bring can only be voiced outside of the dramatic space, and not within.

Drama-in-education (DiE) contests this power structure in a radical way, by placing the learner at the centre of learning, and gently pushing the teacher to the sidelines, allowing her to contain, constrain and guide the process, but have no further say than that. The great aspect of applied drama as defined by Heathcote and her peers is that

it can be practised by a regular academic teacher exploring a regular academic subject, or an NGO worker working with victims of domestic abuse. It is a technique that uses tools and methods of drama to enrich the exploration, to enable mining into the topic and to find an emotional connect with it. It is strongly oriented towards analysis and reflection, which Heathcote sees as “the only thing that, in the long run, changes anybody” (Wagner, 1976, p.77). Drama is the only medium that allows the explorer to step in and out of the created fantasy world at will and to retain both emotional connect and detachment at the same time. Heathcote explains it in the following way: “I am the tree. I see the tree. I am inside the tree” (*Pieces of Dorothy*, 1993). Drama enables the participant to see the possibilities that lie within any situation—from emotional stress to mathematics—to go with the investigation of ‘what happens when...?’, rather than the limiting TV series format question: ‘what happens next?’ To sum up, in the words of Pamela Bowell and Brian Heap, “Drama is empowering...Drama provides opportunities for investigation and reflection, for celebration and challenge” (Bowell and Heap, 2013, p. 3).

EXPORING DRAMA FOR EARLY YEARS

Having for some years practised DiE with children 6 years of age and older, I had wondered whether this kind of exploration would work with children of the 2-5 age group. At this stage, children make huge strides in the areas of cognitive, social, emotional, linguistic and motor skills development (Lesar, 2015). Tagore recognised early childhood as the most critical time for developing empathy and the ability to connect with one’s surroundings. Unfortunately, this is also the time when they have their first encounter with the culture of power, which constantly seeks to mould the child into a ‘socially appropriate person’, curbing the development of imagination and creativity. What kind of drama might aid their negotiation into the world of social interactions while providing enough outlets for creativity? A response to this question came in 2015 while watching Helios Theatre’s *H₂O* as a parent of a child who was not-yet-5. After the show, we tried to deconstruct it, and failed miserably. Water was the ‘hero’ of the piece, of that we were sure. All it had was water—flowing, dripping, still, rippling—and nothing else. There were no words, very little music—most of it was the sounds

and actions of water, curated (I cannot think of a better word) by 3 performers. And yet, for 30 minutes the adults, along with children ranging from 1.5 to 7 years of age, were utterly engrossed. There was comedy in it, and drama, as well as moments of deep reflection. This was our introduction to Material Theatre.

Two years later, by invitation of the puppeteer Anurupa Roy, I was privileged to observe Material Theatre close up at a workshop for practitioners. The mentor was Barbara Kölling, one of the founder members of Helios Theatre, and the director of the fascinating *H₂O*. The learners were practitioners of drama and puppetry who were trying to find the right language with which to approach younger audiences. While this particular workshop was intended to initiate drama professionals into theatre for young children, an extension of the work, curated by Roy, catered to the needs of teachers who work with 4-7 year olds. The intent of this extension was to explore the possibility of kinesthetic, learner-led learning as an element of the curriculum, and to look at the possibility of introducing DiE to the Early Years learner in this way. As someone who watched the entire process as a fly on the wall, I was amazed by the potential of Material Theatre to set aside power structures entirely and create a drama space both democratic and creative in a way I had not experienced before.

INTRODUCING MATERIAL THEATRE

While I'm yet to come across a comprehensive definition of the term, I will try to put together one which fulfils the basic requirements of the form. Material Theatre is a form of theatre in which the primary performer is the material in focus – which may be natural or constructed – without its essential character manipulated or altered in any way. It is created by conducting 'research' with material—by playing with it, engaging with it, watching it and listening to it, until moments emerge that speak to the director/actor. Out of several possibilities that may emerge out of this playful research, selected moments are chosen and recreated to weave a narrative (preferably non-verbal, though minimal verbal interventions do occur). The resulting performance, when done well, is meaningful, entertaining and potentially transformative for children as young as 18 months (occasionally younger) and adults alike. It is also, by its very nature, democratic, as it is capable of speaking to human beings irrespective

of not only age, but socio-economic, linguistic, cultural and national allegiances.

The fundamental principle to which Material Theatre must adhere is, in the words of Anurupa Roy, founder of Katkatha, which hosted the workshop, that it has to be “performance created with a chosen material at the centre, wherein the materiality, or intrinsic identity of the material, is kept intact” (personal interviews, December 2017-January 2018). Of the nine performances created in the above-mentioned workshop, three worked with natural materials (clay, sand and stone), while the others worked with constructed materials (wool, paper and plastic). Each performance took the lead from the nature of the material at the heart of it. The ones with sand and stones talked about the fluidity of borders and the challenges of coexistence for those with different identities, while clay coated and clung, melted and matted to create the nature of relationships. The paper show took the shape of a city with windows opening out towards a different existence. The plastic shows explored power and transformations. There were sounds, but hardly any words. There were actors, but they were hardly seen in most of the shows, and where they were, they were entirely upstaged. The children who sat through these 30-minute shows had stories to share as they came out, multiple stories, arguments about what really happened, yet each one convinced that they had witnessed a clear narrative that catered to their imagination.

It was interesting to see their momentary response to the shows, as the children emerged from the performance area eager to touch and feel the materials left outside for them to play with. It seemed to work as a reminder to them to engage with the world body and mind, a kind of engagement that traditional education tends to deny rather than support.

TRAINING THE SENSES

While some teachers were simply accompanying the children to the performances, some others were a part of the Material Theatre training group. This latter set were asked to watch the performances twice—the first time to watch as adult viewers, and the second time to watch the children as they watched the performances. They were given observation forms to fill and reflect upon their observations. After the

shows got over, they sat around at debriefing circles and shared and discussed their observations. Questions and doubts remained: how would the language of the show translate into usable educational material?

Intensive hands-on workshops followed, where the teachers were encouraged to let go of what they knew about the materials given to them and to explore them as though they were meeting the materials for the first time. It was interesting to note how difficult it was for pre-primary teachers, who constantly work with a sensory curriculum, to let go of their assumptions and make discoveries. The process involved multiple reminders to ‘only observe’ and to suspend interpretation temporarily, to feel the material and to engage with its materiality—to push and feel it yield and also the resistance it offered, to recognise its texture and weight by way of touch and sound – in short, to engage with it in sensory and kinesthetic ways by consciously suspending cognitive knowledge. It required recognition in deep, primeval ways, and abrogation of the ‘knowing’ superiority of the human mind, in order, to rephrase Kölling’s words, to find “the moment when the light comes in” (personal interviews, December 2017-January 2018). Once the breakthrough did come, however, it was time to take children along on the path to exploring the possibilities of learning about materials. This was the moment at which they discovered the problem of power.

SHIFTING THE POWER DYNAMIC

Material Theatre requires the actor to move behind the material in order to make the material the ‘hero’ of the show. It is, in effect, an abdication of power on the part of the actor. It demands that the audience co-create the narrative as the show moves on, pulling its imagination into the performance space. This is a radical shift in the traditional power dynamic that exists between performers and audience in the theatre, and a huge reason for the creative potential of Material Theatre. Barbara Kölling speaks of adult audiences crying at a performance of her show, *Traces*, where she works with sand and paper. The response is subliminal, and draws attention to Material Theatre’s links with ritual and the earliest forms of drama. In the words of Helios member Erpho Bell, “Forming and fading is inherent to all materials. By observing the material, we encounter one of the theatre’s most fundamental theme duos: life and death. In dramaturgical terms,

this duo is essential for developing scenes for the play” (*Forming and Fading*, 2013). Over the course of the performance, by developing a rhythm and through respectful handling of the material, which requires both tranquillity and time, the performers are able to generate meditative moments again and again. During the play, everyone, performers and spectators alike, has the time to focus and meditate upon the material’s properties and capabilities. This creates a certain sense of slowing down of time, allowing viewers to participate in the making of meaning while, at the same time, engaging peacefully with the ideas as a community.

Rosenow and Bailie point to the decreasing significance of nature in early childhood education, particularly, and the loss of connect not only with nature, but with culture and with themselves, as a result. As the human response to material has moved more and more towards manipulation, we have stopped responding to the inherent drama of all materials, which is why, one imagines, an occasional glance such as the plastic bag scene in *American Beauty* (1999) becomes a matter of critical discourse. So, when our gaze is drawn firmly into the curated drama of Material Theatre, ancient memories and associations flow, drawing an invisible ‘lasso’ around the community of watchers, binding them together. The cumulative energy in the space at the end of a performance has to be experienced to be believed. This same energy can be found, albeit in a different form, in the classroom after a session with materials. However, this, too, requires a power shift from the teacher to the student and material.

Teachers in the Early Years are often called ‘mother-teachers’, with reference to the nurturing role they need to play. The pre-Primary teacher is always well-prepared with her routine and learning materials, and the ‘magic’ in the classroom is very well choreographed and coordinated by her. In this area, the learning process is well-planned, never left to chance, and often involves manipulation of materials. So, to ask a teacher to step back and let the material lead was to ask her, in effect, take one of the biggest risks of her career. I would not be over-stating it when I say that this was the most difficult and challenging moment for all the teachers participating in the process.

Preparation for this moment involved choosing the material to introduce to the classroom and researching it thoroughly, sometimes asking a colleague to be the outside eye that watches both directly and

records on a video camera, in order to enable critical conversations on process and emerging narratives. One pair of teachers, working together, opted to take it to the children even before they felt that their own research was done, aiming to attempt a co-created narrative, and enhancing the risks manifold in the process. As a result, they encountered interesting outcomes. At a moment in the performance, which teachers found emotionally powerful, children laughed; and at other moments, in which they were, in their own words, 'passing the time', children were absorbed and quiet. Later, when questioned about their responses, the children indicated that they saw similar things and had similar associations as the adults, but their responses to the same stimuli were different from adult responses. This gave the adults pause to think, and raised many queries about the teachers' own understanding of regular classroom transactions. Later, when children were given the material to play with, some began by imitating their favourite moments from the teachers' performance, while others tried to find their own pathways. The teachers were initially disappointed by the imitation, but conversation with the children revealed a desire to understand how the moments spoke to them, and to experience it for themselves.

Another important discovery was made with regard to outcomes. As an inclusive school, our school reserves 25 per cent of seats for underprivileged children from the neighbourhood, who often struggle with classwork, since the school's target language is English, a language that is not spoken at their homes. This experience gave these children a way to speak about their explorations and feelings, with the teachers helping the entire class to find the words to articulate the same. Bringing the entire class at par, even if it was for a moment, was perhaps one of the most important outcomes of the introduction of Material Theatre into the classrooms, as it opened up, in that moment, the possibility to question the culture of power operating until then.

This was also an outcome that, I found, was not restricted to our corner of the world. Kölling, in her interview with me, talked about working with children who have stopped speaking for a completely different reason.

In Germany, sometimes you will find such children, who have stopped speaking, because nobody speaks at home anymore, and it is only the television that speaks. By the time they are 10, they

are divided into Primary School, Secondary School and Gymnasium. So, by the time they are 11, those who get sent to Primary School know that they are not smart enough, and they will never get a job. It changes everything—it changes their possibilities in life, their relationships. ...So, at a very young age, children get to feel that they are stupid and not valued, and so they stop speaking. We like to work with these children to bring them back to learning, and expressing themselves. (personal interviews, December 2017-January 2018)

What is it about Material Theatre that encourages children to speak? The moments of recognition and empathy that are created in the shared experience of it seem to demand articulation in a language not regularly used in the classroom space. It seems to transform the transactional space into, first, a space for inquiry, and then, a space to build a community based on shared experience. The moment, in drama, that holds the entire room in an embrace of shared empathy, the moment that comes closest to ritual in its deep-rooted, non-verbal acceptance of humanity, the moment at which, as Heathcote might say, we ‘drop to the universal’—is the moment that is mined in Material Theatre.

THE ECOLOGICAL SPACE

One very important, and perhaps expected, outcome of the Material Theatre process is the role it fulfils in encouraging students to experience the world with their entire bodies. As our classrooms and homes get increasingly ‘sanitized’, children are by and large encouraged to approach everything in the world with shoes, masks and gloves. Children discover the world through smell and touch far before they learn to trust their instincts of seeing and hearing, and by emphasising the latter two senses over the first two, our educational system creates an unnecessary cognitive hierarchy, and reduces our ability to trust in ourselves as complete beings. When we urge a child playing in the garden to put on their shoes, we often end up doing more harm than good. “The feet are not just one part of your body, they are a very important part and they give you a lot of sensory stimulation, and if you don’t have that any more, you are losing a whole

aspect of yourself,” says Kölling (personal interviews, December 2017-January 2018). What this also does is distance us further from the planet we live on, making it harder to care about it.

The introduction of Material Theatre in the classroom enables children to once again look at their environment as a space that demands engagement from their entire beings. As they touch, hear, smell and observe the way natural and created materials behave, they will learn more about their natures: a knowledge that is not derived from second-hand information, but based on their own deep understanding. This, we hope, will help them to grow into more ecologically sensitive individuals—people who care about the earth because they are in touch with the earth, in a literal as well as metaphorical sense. Research bears out that this will also help them to connect with other cultures and with themselves, and to think and talk about peace in active ways.

This will also help them to examine the false hierarchies that exist between people who work with their eyes and ears only, and the others who employ all six senses to get by in the world. The problem of caste is one that has plagued India for millennia, and one of the ways it has visibly continued to make its presence felt in an urbanised, modern India, is by maintaining the hierarchy of mind over body, and reading/knowning over touching/knowning. This is not the space to discuss it, so I will say only this: there is much about the ideas of purity and pollution that needs to be challenged in India, and much of taught behaviour in Indian homes and classrooms serves to propagate ideas about what is to be considered ‘dirty’ or ‘low’ work. Children below five years of age have not yet been taught these hierarchies and stigmas, and the freedom to indulge all senses may keep a corner of their minds open to questioning and to challenging them.

MAKING MEANING AS A DRAMATIC ACT

While Material Theatre may seem, in terms of the traditional definition, closer to aesthetics than to art, audiences are aware of a sense of carefully curated moments put together in a strongly performative way. How far, then, can it be called a democratic form?

Bell speaks of ‘that orchestrated shift between suspense and relief for the player and the spectator within the play—from action-packed performance to absolute peace’ while describing how the drama in

Material Theatre is created. Yet, one thing is certain—there will be no explanations. “Children need something to sink their teeth into,” says Kölling (personal interviews, December 2017-January 2018). The performers dig deep while researching materials, unearthing deep questions which then find their way into the performance. This creates a performance that is abstract in essence with moments that are poignant and layered. It is now clear that the moments at which audiences take a pause are identifiable, but their reasons for taking a pause may not be clearly identifiable. At one of our improvised sessions, some of the participants, from Europe, read what was an identifiable Indian school shoe as a working man’s shoe. As this shoe interacted with a high heeled sandal, the dynamics of the interaction were read entirely differently. Where the Indian viewers saw an aggressive mother-and-child interaction, the Europeans saw a sexual encounter! In another performance, where the performer sprinkled sand to signify loss of habitat, child audiences read aridity and loss. This seems to indicate that cultural specificities, as well as age-related sensibilities as indicated above, can potentially impact the way the performance is read, and that it is possible to go away with having received a narrative that is at variance with what was conceived by the performers. While this enables democratic meaning-making, the Material Theatre show runs the risk of lacking a clear narrative.

Having said that, the combination of research into material behaviour, dramaturgy, use of music and actor behaviour provides a potent form of political theatre that rarely fails to convey the larger questions, even though they may come through disparate images, rather than by way of an overarching narrative. Handing over the material to students in the classroom then enables them to engage with the same questioning, albeit through contexts of their own.

FOR DEMOCRACY

We are at present living in a world characterised by extreme inequality. In his seminal essay, “The Dramatic Child” (1992), the playwright Edward Bond talks about the kind of systems that exist in a post-globalisation world as one that “depends on markets and prisons,” where more and more institutions are turning into kinds of prisons. A new kind of prison is the one presented by the digital environment,

which is also creating havoc with our attention spans and ability to engage with the world. I firmly believe that in this world, more than ever, we need drama to push us to connect our learning with our emotions and empower us to find ways of ‘knowing’ beyond what is Google-able. The Indian National Curriculum Framework of 2005 urges schools “to nurture and build on [children’s] active and creative capabilities—their inherent interest in making meaning, in relating to the world in ‘real’ ways through acting on it and creating, and in relating to other humans.” We need to find ways of working together to overcome the inequalities that exist both within and outside of the school space—inequalities that are propagated through means of transaction such as money, social networks and language. Drama in education pushes the boundaries of school learning transactions to bring inequalities to the forefront and find ways of facing it and dealing with it. Material Theatre removes the inequalities of age, background, language, ethnicity, gender, and power, and pushes the shared common experience to the forefront to emphasise the possibilities of coexistence.

I conclude, with Edward Bond’s words:

Education for the market’s needs could be a prison. We must educate children for democracy. The psyche and society are a theatre or they are a prison. At the heart of all democracy is drama. (Bond, 1992)

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Manjima Chatterjee is a drama explorer, teacher and occasional writer. She began writing for the theatre after being accepted to the Writers' Bloc Workshops organised by Rage and supported by Royal Court Theatre. She has been shortlisted for the BBC's International Radio Playwriting Competition and she won The Hindu Metro Plus Playwright Award in 2013. Her book, *Two Plays on Hunger*, was published by

Dhauri Books in 2018. Trained in process drama under Maya Krishna Rao, Manjima has worked with children in drama for most of her life. She works at Shiv Nadar School, Noida, as the Coordinator of the school's Arts programme.