

Exercising the Mind

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ABSTRACT

In this article I return to the question of whether we should draw a distinction between theatre-making and drama as a learning medium. Human beings, like all mammals, learn to survive through play. The skills we develop through playing enable us to learn about ourselves, others and our environment. Humans also have a prolonged period of protected and dependent childhood during which time we use our imaginations to envisage our futures and, unlike our mammalian brethren, become aware of our mortality. This ability to learn through play we continue to employ in our adult lives. Alongside this personal involvement in play there has also developed the art form of theatre. I argue that drama and theatre are different in the same way that school athletics are different from professional sport; they are related but not conjoined. Drama is an essential tool of 'play' that enables humans to critically examine the world as is and discover what part we can 'play' in shaping the future. As sport is to the body so drama is to the mind: it is important that all young people have access to this mind exercise as it is for them to access to physical activity.

Respect for drama and theatre in schools has always been somewhat tenuous. From the days of Peter Slade (*Child Drama*, 1954) and Brian Way (*Development through Drama*, 1967) UK drama teachers have always felt a need to justify their activities to colleagues who just ‘don’t get it.’ I will consider some of the ways that drama has been and continues to be defended in the education system. I will note the confusion in the minds of headteachers and educational authorities about the difference between drama in education and theatre/acting. This confusion is shared by students themselves who may misconstrue the drama lessons as a step on a career path to celebrity and riches—an ambivalence drama teachers and school authorities may be guilty of encouraging. I wish to remind us that the human quiddities that enable us to learn through drama and to undertake the art form of theatre are related but should not be confused.

Humans are not the only mammals that play. It is an instinctive developmental feature of all our mammalian relatives. We have only to observe the behaviour of kittens or lion cubs, lambs or deer—in fact any young mammals—to see that the play-fighting, the stalking and leaping are all preparing them for their adult lives, providing them with the hunting and defensive survival skills that will allow them in the future to produce progeny: “The young of animals play, as it were, by instinct and...the form of their play is a rehearsal for life” (Lowenfold, 1935, p. 207). The pioneer drama teacher Caldwell Cook put it thus: “It would not be wise to send a child innocent into the big world... [But] it is possible to hold rehearsals.... And that is Play” (Cook, 1917, p. 1). It is of note that these two commentators, the first writing from the world of child psychology and the second from that of drama in schools, should both use the metaphor of the ‘rehearsal’ for, as I hope to show, it is an aspect of drama and theatre that both unites and separates the two concepts.

There are though, ways in which these mammalian traits have led us to inhabit a far more complicated and frightening world. We have, if you will, nibbled at the fruit of knowledge and thus, unlike other animals we have a concept of the sun rising on another tomorrow, a desire to make that tomorrow better than today and a fear that it may not be so. We even know that one day there will be no tomorrow and that we will die.

The ability to play, to put ourselves in someone else’s shoes, gives

rise to the art of acting, but it also allows us to try out and imagine different futures. When children are playing at being something or someone other than themselves they are perfectly aware of the fact that they are playing with one reality whilst being fixed in another. It is a way of gaining mastery over their worlds. As a result of the insights gained through play we seek, more than other animals, to radically alter our world for the benefit of ourselves and (hopefully) for others. Through play and imagination we have the ability to envisage change. I argue that through educational drama we gift ourselves with the ability to conceive of such changes and through theatre we present possibilities to others to consider such interpretations and changes.

JUSTIFICATIONS FOR DRAMA AS A LEARNING MEDIUM IN SCHOOLS

Let's face it, sometimes explaining the benefits of drama to colleagues or to educational administrators, can be like trying to explain string theory to an owl (or to me for that matter). Drama comes with noise, an insatiable appetite for physical and timetable space and general disruption to the smooth and sedate running of a school. Headteachers and fellow teachers see wildly enthusiastic energised pupils anxious to get to class and willing to work additional hours after class. They are clearly having fun. Ergo, they cannot possibly be learning anything, can they? Teaching is a slog. Learning takes studious application, coping with boredom and rigour. Drama, if it is a subject at all, is certainly a 'soft' subject.

From this it follows that only those deemed incapable of 'proper' study will be guided to the drama option, to 'let off steam' and to be corralled in an environment where they can cause the least disruption to others. Headteachers will tolerate drama for these reasons. Perhaps to their chagrin the drama 'lot' seem not only happy but also display confidence and often achieve unexpectedly well in wider academic assessments. In 2010 the DICE Consortium of drama specialists from across Europe researched and published two profound studies of the benefits of school drama which offer teachers a great deal of ammunition to use in the defence of their discipline. The analyses report that children are full of energy, more self-confident and open to others as well as being tolerant and cooperative (DICE, 2010a, p. 66).

They also tend to be socially aware and active in the community. Unfortunately for the drama teacher these qualities are rarely the competences that examinations measure. 'But what are they learning?' the confused wise owls wonder. 'I thought they'd be doing William Shakespeare or Tennessee Williams.' Of course, if they dropped in on some of the drama workshops they might actually see forensic insights into *King Lear* or *A Streetcar Named Desire* but judgements about drama as a learning medium are much more easily made if one deprives oneself the encumbrance of knowledge.

The problem for drama teachers is that the benefits of drama are ephemeral and attempts to explain can sound like sloppy liberalism in a world where hard facts and measurable success are paramount. As a result they fall back on arguments that they hope will resonate and make sense to those around them, not because they believe they are the central justification, but because one has to try and communicate in the language of the listener. To the headteacher they will stress that through drama the pupils develop emotionally and socially and are better able to fit into the world around them. They may or may not excel at maths and science but results in other subjects will certainly be enhanced to the good of the school's examination success rate. *Making a World of Difference* (DICE, 2010b) sets out to examine the function of drama beyond the usual 'key' educational competences. In particular they considered communication, learning to learn, interpersonal, civic and intercultural competence, entrepreneurship and cultural expression. None of these is highly regarded by the assessment regimes of education systems and thus become overlooked despite their central contribution to making us human.¹ Instead drama teachers might fall back on the argument that 'at least drama is something they can excel at' and that 'arts are an important part of society.' They (and even the school head and governors) might refer to the opinion of those few business leaders who objectively appreciate the need for creative thinking. In the National Drama's *Drama Magazine* (Spring 2019, Volume 25:1, p. 6) Zeena Rasheed quotes Eric Berridge of the global business consulting firm 'Bluewolf':

The arts teach us to challenge, persuade, and argue. They give us

¹ For a fuller list of the DICE summary of skills acquired through drama see DICE 2010b, p. 25.

our language through which we convey our emotions and thoughts. While STEM [science, technology, engineering and maths] skills are necessary, the arts reinforce human-centred thinking that empowers businesses to sympathise with their customers in order to drive growth.

This is a succinct example of the problem that those who find themselves having to defend drama face. I have no issue at all with the early part of the above statement: drama helps us challenge, persuade, argue. Yes, it helps our language development, emotional maturity and human-centred thinking. Then we get the sting in the tale, for all these worthy outcomes of drama are but nothing if they don't actually grease the wheels of commerce in order 'to drive growth.'

I find it hard to imagine the drama teacher gathering the class together and saying, 'OK, today we are going to help you develop your emotional maturity in order that you can go out there and drive growth.' Many teachers and pupils would be horrified to think that the purpose of their exploration of the human condition was to manipulate it commercially. So what *do* the young people expect from drama? It is here that we have to face an unfortunate truth, for whilst some will understand that drama is about emotional development, empathy, teamwork and creatively analysing the world and the way it works, many others will see the sessions as a chance to exercise their egos and prepare themselves for stardom and celebrity. Drama teachers find themselves under pressure to accept this misunderstanding and even to use it to recruit the cohort. Should a piece of publically performed work be successful both drama teacher and headteacher will be welcoming the local press, extolling the virtues and value of the 'talented young people who could go far.'

Justifying drama as a learning medium is like juggling with ectoplasm. The drama teachers instinctively know its value and the children and young people involved feel its value (to the extent that it often doesn't feel like 'learning' at all). Those outside educational drama struggle with their suspicion despite occasional bouts of respect and in this they reflect a confusion that is shared by policy makers at the highest level. As educational curricula become more obsessed with assessment and measurable achievement, subjects that do not fit into such a regime are more and more marginalised. In the UK there has actively been a move to diminish arts subjects, including drama, in

favour of the 'STEM' (science, technology, engineering and maths) subjects that can be more easily assessed and are seen as offering a surer pathway to careers. Overlooking the fact that the world of work is changing exponentially quickly and that the most useful skill to have is the ability to think creatively and flexibly, the education system focuses on facts and ideas that may not even be relevant in ten years time. Have a look at the careers advertised on-line or in a national newspaper. How many jobs of that title existed ten or fifteen years ago? What will be the jobs in the future? I would argue that a sound preparation in drama education is more future-proof than the current trend to train for today's (or even yesterday's) careers.

Once again, even in the minds of educational experts who are think-tanking curricula, there is a dangerous conflation of learning *through* drama and learning about theatre. This can be evidenced by a brief overview of drama in the curriculum in the UK. In 1990 a National Curriculum was introduced for the first time. Drama was removed from its place in the school timetable other than as an adjunct to the study of English. In *Theatre in Education in Britain* I summarise the new place of drama:

References to drama and theatre in the Curriculum are either in terms of their ability to help with verbal and social skills or, in the case of theatre, as an opportunity to learn about production techniques, acting as a craft, and developing skills of analytical criticism to 'understand the educational, cultural and social purposes of drama'. (Department of Education and Science, 1989, p. 2; cited by Wooster, 2016, p. 84)

This was how drama was seen in the 1990s in the UK: How to speak, how to behave, how theatre was made and how to write about it. As time went on however, there were changes. Increasingly schools were required to deal with social and health issues and the PSHE [Personal, Social and Health education] curriculum was introduced as an adjunct to the National Curriculum. Later 'Citizenship' was added to the list. The requirement to deal with these areas of human activity opened the door to drama education once again and gave an impetus to what has become known as Applied Drama. Whilst giving ammunition to drama teachers to use with their colleagues and to headteachers to use with their governing boards, it is also reductive of drama. Drama could now

be seen as the prophylactic, or even the cure, for society's ills but the elephant in the room was to be left dormant. This 'elephant' is the potentially politically charged fact that through drama students tend to learn to think creatively about moral and social issues and question why things are as they are and to ask if they could be different. Schools and colleges have had to tiptoe through this political minefield. As a result many investigations by drama students into, say, drug culture, tend to come down on the 'just say no' approach and avoid the difficult road that might take them into a consideration of how and why such a culture exists and the complicity of wider societal mores and government policies in the creation of the conditions in which people wish to escape their realities.

Theatre in Education has suffered in the same way. Whereas in the 60s and 70s many projects used participation to take children and young people through an experience in which they could critically and creatively examine causes, effects and possibilities, more recent projects (under the pressures of time, funding and lack of appropriate actor/teacher training) tend to be performance-based offering a quick-fix message to a large audience who have little opportunity to engage critically.

THE PURPOSE OF LEARNING THROUGH DRAMA

I have called this article 'Exercising the Mind' and this stems from a metaphor or comparison that I am fond of using and which can be of help when trying to explain what it is that learning through drama achieves. Consider for a moment the place of sport and physical exercise within education. There is an acceptance (self-evident to governors, headteachers and colleagues) of the essential value of keeping the body healthy and that there may also be benefits as regards teamwork, concentration, determination and ambition. A good school will encourage pupils to be involved in sporting activity and if asked why, they will applaud these potential outcomes. Some of these children or young people may show an exceptional aptitude and may inspire the observation that 'she could be an Olympic medallist one day,' or, 'he will play for The Yankees/Manchester United.' But this is not why we encourage sport as part of our education system. We undertake physical endeavours because they are good for our physical

health.

In the same way drama is (or should be) part of the curriculum not because we are hoping to train the actors and directors of tomorrow, but because the processes of drama are good for our brains, our thinking mechanisms and our mental health. Certainly there will be pupils who are introduced to a love of theatre and performance through exposure to drama. And there will be those who show exceptional skill in performance and will be inspired to dedicate themselves to excelling at acting. Of these the schools may say 'she will be a household name one-day,' or, 'he will win an Oscar one of these days.' But this is not why we should have drama on the curriculum. Drama is about making healthier human beings. Learning through drama is learning empathy: learning about ourselves by walking a little way in someone else's shoes. The wise phrase from Satire X of the Roman poet Juvenal instructs us to pray for a 'healthy mind in a healthy body.' Note that that it is the health of the *mind* which is placed first.

THE PLAY'S THE THING?

I have argued above that it is the human ability to play that feeds our ability to discover ourselves and ourselves within the world, and to enable us to mould the world rather than be merely moulded by it. Among the drama practitioners that have shown us the way are the likes of Peter Slade (1954), Brian Way (1967), Dorothy Heathcote (e.g. 'Drama as a Process for Change' in Drain, 1995) and Gavin Bolton (e.g. *Towards a Theory of Drama*, 1979). Educational philosophers that have enabled us to theorise and understand the importance of creative and critical thinking are Bruner (*The Relevance of Education*, 1972), Vygotsky (*Thought and Language*, 1962) and Gardner (*Multiple Intelligences*, 1993). Through these two strands of practical and theoretical approach we are enabled to work with our students and open up an understanding of the world for them, and repeatedly, for ourselves.

This human ability to play however has also engendered an art form called theatre. Born of ritual and community reaffirmation the ability to think oneself into the mind of an 'other' became professionalised to the extent where people are now expressly trained and practised in showing us the lives of others for our entertainment and edification. The actor brings to the performance area or screen an

understanding and portrayal of another human being and, through their interaction with other actors, presents to the audience a piece of quasi-life designed to make us reflect and to think or laugh (or both).

This, of course, is what many will assume you are talking about when you say you are 'doing' or 'teaching' or 'creating' drama with your students. 'When's the performance?' they will ask. And maybe there is a performance if you are creating theatre. Let us assume that you are, on this occasion, making theatre and not 'doing' drama.

Whether the production is a Stanislavskian performance of *Death of a Salesman*, a Brechtian production of *Mother Courage* or a piece of socially inspired theatre devised by the students themselves, the audience will be learning about the themes and ideas of the play as filtered through the research, expertise and talent of the young actors. The actors will be demonstrating their understanding of their character within the frame of the play as a whole and we will be observing their understanding and have it conveyed to us by the overall concept of the production. That human ability to 'play,' to think outside ourselves and to empathise, is active within everyone present at the ritual of the performance.

In creating the theatre a myriad of skills will have been learned and exercised by the troupe and all in order to share their thoughts and ideas with an audience of 'others.' The audience receives this imaginative creation vicariously, suspending their disbelief in the artifice and using their imaginations to process the ideas emanating from the stage. In doing this they deepen their own understanding of the world by observing those who have been deeply engaged with the ideas for a period of weeks. A successful performance will encourage reflection and even a re-examination of the world and our own place within it. The actors distil this in the making of theatre: the audience in their consumption of it.

The skills employed by the actors in creating the piece will reflect some of those of the drama lessons. There will be team working, leadership, compromise, studying, researching, confidence, empathy but also memorising, vocal and physical work plus perhaps a range of technical skills. But despite the success of their production most of these young artists will not go on to careers in the theatre or media, so what was the point? In 2012 an article was published in the *Youth Theatre Journal* analysing the impact of school theatre participation based upon the responses of adults recalling their adolescent

involvement (McCammon et al, 2012). Those responding to the survey behind the report were of course self-selecting and the positivity of the result is to be expected. However, the research team felt able to assert that 'quality high school theatre and speech experiences can not only influence but even accelerate adolescent development and provide residual, positive, lifelong impacts throughout adulthood' (p. 5). Responders stressed the impact on their confidence and their understanding of social and historical issues (p. 6). Half of those contributing to the research were working in the arts and half were not and the article argues that taking part in performance-orientated projects has lifelong value whatever the career trajectory of the participants:

Any career success I've experienced is largely due to the combination of process thinking developed in engineering school and, more significantly, my theatre, speech, and debate experience in high school. I learned to communicate effectively, write well, speak clearly and distinctly, engage and hold an audience with pacing, inflection, movement, etc. (Female, Global Leader for a Major Corporation. Cited in McCammon et al 2012, p. 12)

Whilst I whole-heartedly agree it is interesting that the study ends by listing highly successful theatre, film and media personalities who are known to have taken part in school productions. It is important to remember that those with no interest in performing or in any aspects of a career in the arts still need the mind exercise of drama as much as they need to keep their bodies fit.

The classic Theatre in Education model that I have written about elsewhere is especially adept at combining the two aspects of performance and audience-ship. In such projects a group of actors, also trained in drama facilitation, would work with a group of young people who participate in the drama but who are protected by their role. As 'journalists' or 'a board of enquiry' or 'friends of the characters' in the performance elements they can open up their own critical faculties to feed and influence the drama. In doing so, and in a way that reflects Vygotsky's 'Zone of Proximal Development' (see *Mind in Society*, 1978) they are enabled to start from where they are in their own intellectual and social development and reach for the next rung on

the critical and analytical ladder safely scaffolded by the theatrical construct around them. Typically projects might be based in an historical event but, through such direct involvement, children are better enabled to relate the experience of the content of the performance elements to their own lives. Because they are not acting but merely holding for a moment the mask of role in front of themselves, the participants are safely enabled to engage with ideas and test out opinions that are both 'theirs' and 'not theirs' at the same time. I have seen such techniques be safely and profoundly explored with quite young children dealing with subjects that even adults find troubling such as abuse, death and bereavement. In classic TIE children's interventions, as participants in role, can be voiced. They can be accepted and valued. The children watch the actors and remain secure as themselves in a protected frame. That is why it is rarely advisable to allow visitors to a TIE project, for it can turn—at least some—of the children into self-conscious actors.

CONCLUSION

In this article I have tried to address how we can distinguish theatre-making from drama as a learning medium. I have noted that, whilst all mammals learn through play, humans have developed the ability to maintain play-learning into their adult lives. As sentient and social beings we continue to develop emotionally and socially through our employment of the ability to play, to imagine and to envisage the future. We have a prolonged period of protected childhood compared to other mammals and in this time—as well as beyond it—we dramatise our lives in order to develop and adapt to the world. We also are enabled to adapt the world to us—something that we perhaps have not done very well in the past few centuries. But we can envisage the future: we can analyse today and we can determine our tomorrows. Drama is especially good at enabling us to do this.

This same ability to play has enabled humans to create an analytical and critical ability to concentrate aspects of the human condition into an art form we call theatre but it is distinct from drama for learning. As sports activity exercises the body so drama exercises the mind. And just as it can be rewarding to watch highly trained athletes play and compete at their sports so audiences can learn much from

actors who excel at their craft. If however we allow the two to merge, if we allow drama lessons to become acting classes, we are limiting the ability of these play-inspired opportunities to exercise the minds of all. Rather they become primarily the playground of the prima donnas. They can overlap at times. Youth Theatre, as with school productions discussed above, is a tremendously valuable experience for young people, but it will usually only be of interest to those with an interest in performing and will exclude those who, in the privacy of a drama session, might be enabled to examine their own demons and confront the demons of others. The drama class is an extension of play: a progression through which we learn about ourselves and others. The theatre rehearsal may include these elements but will also be driven by acting technique and the needs and expectations of mounting a production to an external audience. Let us have both but let us remain aware of where they unite and where they diverge. We all need to exercise our minds.

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