

Sue Jennings

THE PLACE OF DRAMA IN EDUCATION

Drama in Education has progressed a long way from the formal stereotyped school play, or an extra taken after school together with elocution. There is an increase in Drama Advisors, teachers taking Drama in their training courses, as well as full time Drama and Movement teachers. Theatres, too, are coming more in touch with schools, with special programmes for the schools to visit, or teams of actor teachers who take programmes into the schools.

Recently, with much hard pioneering, the importance of Drama in remedial Education has been realised. Although it still needs considerable development, Drama is beginning to find its place both as a means of teaching the disadvantaged child, as well as providing a form of therapeutic help and support.

However, Drama progress seems to have stopped at what I term the justificatory stage. For instance, many teachers agree to having Drama in their schools, either because it is a current trend, or because it is seen as a useful vehicle for teaching other subjects. They will say that Drama is useful because it stimulates language learning, or helps a child to be interested in history, etc.

I would agree that Dramatic methods could influence teaching techniques at their very roots. Dorothy Heathcote has written with insight on Drama being a *system* not a subject on a school curriculum.

Many specialists make use of the 'project' approach in Drama teaching. Educational themes are taken, improvised and explored. Groups are given challenges to overcome and problems to solve through the Dramatic situation. Past events are reconstructed and resolved, and current events are considered. However this work has still a long way to go. Much of it is directed with very little self exploration possible. The focus tend to be on the past and the present, with little attention being paid to the future. Also the emphasis tends to be on the past and present of National events and International events. What about the social environment of the group that they are directly in touch with, and the personal events of the individual members of the group? Perhaps we should balance the Epic Drama approach with something on a smaller scale, that has direct impact on the lives of the members of the class.

Even when there is sympathy towards Drama in the school, much of it suffers from being a once-only event by a visiting group. Often there is little scope for development and growth.

However, I think we need to look at the whole medium in greater depth. As a Drama Therapist I am concerned with the effect of the *experience* of Drama, whether or not the class is deemed to be 'Remedial'. I use the word Drama in its widest sense, to

encompass child's play, as well as the most formal of theatre and all shades of dramatic experience in between whether in sound, words, movement or dance.

I would suggest that we cannot progress beyond the justificatory a society, still scared of expressing or examining feelings.

The reaction of many educationalists to exploring feelings in Drama, (or in any other situation) is that it is self-indulgent; creativity is to do with discipline, often imposed. Classes are conducted through a Dramatic experience, which may give a lot of pleasure, but is highly inflexible and often an extension of the teacher's own creativity.

At the other extreme are the specialists who believe that 'feelings' means 'free drama', complete licence to do anything except actually kill people. The frequent result is total chaos with many staff feeling it is a complete waste of time, and many children dismissing it as complete 'mucking about'. Often the quieter children become more quiet and the active ones hyperactive.

These two extreme points of view need reconciling, but first we have to see the imbalance in each. The first example, the overdirected class allows no room for individual feelings, exploration, or expression. The second situation allows them all, but has no boundaries and thereby becomes a self-destructive situation.

Is a third approach possible? I am sure that it is, but it means reconsidering what we are doing. Firstly, we should be prepared to look outside our own society, to those societies where Drama is still built in to the life style. Secondly, we must be prepared to go *underneath* all the justifications, and see Drama at the very core of our development and growth.

To develop the first point means putting aside prejudice concerning 'primitive' society, and taking stock of its ritual expression. Very often primitive ritual is dismissed as being non-creative, pagan, uncivilised, or even dangerous! In any case, it is deemed to be inappropriate to the Twentieth-century, Western world. I am not suggesting we should plagiarise primitive ritual but we must begin to discover our own *meaningful ritual*. By ritual, I mean group experience, which involves its members in a *known pattern of actions*, through some art form, through which a feeling of group communication and identity is engendered.

If we look more closely at primitive ritual, we can see that the ritual provides the *boundaries for human experience*. For example, a ritual might be a repetitive dance, or a chant and invocation. The first can open and close a trance-dance session, during which display of the most extreme behaviour is permitted, which in everyday African society would not be tolerated. The chant and invocation can be at the beginning and end of a Malay Shadow Theatre performance, where after the invocation, the puppeteer improvises from the Hindu myths with various stock characters to which he adds others of his own choosing. The content is improvised to suit the particular audience, remembering that all age groups are watching from children to grandparents.

Each identify with different parts of the tales, join in when they feel like it or sleep when they want, but they sustain the performance until dawn.

From these brief examples, perhaps we can now see ritual as a safe boundary at each end of an experience. And the experience can be freer, expressive and exploratory, because it is contained within these safe, predictable boundaries. This of course happens to a certain extent in our Western theatre where we have the ritual of the National Anthem and Darkness, although Western audiences are rather more restrained and do not shout back (except at Olde Tyme Music Hall). Nevertheless, the actor will know that the feelings of his audience are very important, and if there is two way communication it can produce a very satisfactory experience.

I would suggest that this is the type of structure we should be seeking in our class room; the Drama class that is a combination of ritual and exploration. I would suggest that the developing child will only cope with new experiences and challenges if he can work from a 'safe base' that he is already familiar with.

I would stress that because the term ritual is used, we must not automatically reach for the bongo drums, but discover and create ritual expression that is appropriate and meaningful to the particular group.

The Drama experience in schools (and anywhere else) whether we, as leaders do it from academic, artistic or remedial aims (and all these overlap) has got to re-discover its fundamental roots. It must become a dynamic force whereby children may explore themselves and others; and themselves in relation to others; to seek to understand society, and come to terms with their own identity within society, yet still see the possibilities for change within society.

The responsibility on the educationalist is great; he may be the only bridge for his class into this type of experience. Drama in our society has become so split off from the life style of everyday people, and is more and more a specialist activity.

Drama sessions in schools must be a combination of both ritual and exploration. Then only can we utilise to the full this dynamic medium which should contribute to the fundamental growth of children into whole people.

It can be shown analytically that people who have a fear of falling from heights are also afraid of falling asleep or falling in love.

Bill was terrified of falling. His defence against this fear was to subject himself to situations in which this could happen, to prove that he had nothing to fear. Such a tactic required an exaggerated control of his body, especially his legs. His legs were tight and tense, he could hardly bend them, his ankles were frozen and his arches so contracted that contact of his feet with the ground was greatly reduced.

The Betrayal of the Body Alexander Lowen (Collier 1967)