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Author(s): The Art of Togetherness; reflections on some essential artistic and pedagogic qualities of drama curricula

Article Title: The Art of Togetherness; reflections on some essential artistic and pedagogic qualities of drama curricula

Year of publication: 2009

Link to published version:

<http://www.dramaaustralia.org.au/publications.html>

Publisher statement: None

# **The Art of Togetherness; reflections on some essential artistic and pedagogic qualities of drama curricula: Professor Jonothan Neelands, University of Warwick**

**NJ (Australia) Volume 33 No 1 2009**

## **Abstract:**

The paper examines two quite different examples of drama and theatre education in order to identify how drama curricula are shaped both by external forces and by a common pedagogic and artistic tradition or trajectory. The paper argues that the first and most significant shaping of curriculum is in response to the ideological and political imperatives of the government in power and that this shaping shifts in response to shifts in the field of power. However, the paper argues for maintaining a critical and pro-social pedagogy as the core of any drama curriculum whatever its technical appearance might be. This pedagogy is identified through the two cases and placed in a wider context of pedagogic and artistic thought and practice with the suggestion that by better understanding how the rich traditions of drama and theatre education sit within a broader struggle to give young people pro-social and critical pedagogic and artistic opportunities, drama can strengthen its resolve during periods of curriculum reform.

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I write this contribution to the special themed edition of the NJ on Curriculum as an outsider. I am an England based practitioner and academic with some experience of working with Australian drama educators and with great respect for the successes of the Australian drama community in establishing recognised drama curricula at all ages and stages in their various State education systems. Respect also for that sense of community, which has so often refused to be drawn into the kinds of sectarian wars that have characterised the growth of drama in the English education system. I say English rather than British, because even within the UK there are big differences in how drama is positioned, valued and practiced in the four nations that include Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland<sup>1</sup>. However, I also maintain that the struggles in England to define what drama is, what it is for, who it is for and how it is positioned in the curriculum are central and necessary to the life and vitality of what is increasingly now referred to as Drama and Theatre Education in England. This hybrid term is itself an attempt to capture and animate rather than stifle the tensions between what have historically been seen as different poles of a continuum.

It is not my intention here to rehearse again the history and arguments that have shaped the drama and theatre curriculum in England, but they do inform this article. Nor do I intend to offer a technical model of what a drama curriculum might look like in terms of

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<sup>1</sup> Scotland and Northern Ireland have their own distinctive National Curriculum and in both cases the Arts including drama are a core component of the curriculum. In England drama is subsumed into English even though it is taught in every Secondary school, more usually either as a subject in its own right or as part of an Arts grouping.

objectives, teaching approaches and assessment. Australia leads the world in the design of these models and doesn't need my advice! Rather, I would like to outline some of the shaping principles and values of a drama curriculum. To focus on the essential pedagogic and artistic perspectives that are in my view immutable. But I also want to put these local drama essentials into a bigger contemporary and historical field of reference, so that the idea of a drama curriculum connects to a broader struggle in education to sustain important pro-social and critical pedagogic and artistic opportunities for the young, in the face of increasingly narrow and technical approaches to curriculum design and outcomes. Maxine Greene dubs this approach which must be resisted as curriculum 'positivism'.

*Positivism, or a separating off of fact from value, dominates much of our thinking. Systems are posited that they are to be regulated, not by what an articulate public may conceive to be worthwhile, but by calculable results, by tests of efficiency and effectiveness (1988, p.54)*

From a bigger picture view of course, the shaping of the drama curriculum will inevitably reflect the dominant values and desired outcomes of the field of power at the level of state or national legislature. These normalising influences will determine first how drama is articulated as a curriculum entity and how the selection of content and valuing of outcomes will be done in state or national systems of education which desire some conformity and control over what is taught and how it is organised into subjects or areas of knowledge or learning. Bernstein's classic axiom still holds true:

*How a society selects, classifies, distributes, transmits and evaluates the educational knowledge it considers to be public reflects both the distribution of power and the principles of social control (1973, p. 227)*

This ideological and social shaping of curriculum at a national level to reflect the current dominant ideology of the government of the time is particularly relevant to a cultural subject like drama. In the UK at least the consumption and distribution of culture also reflects the distribution of power and is highly socially stratified. As Bourdieu (1984) concluded:

*Cultural needs are the product of upbringing and education.....To the socially recognised hierarchy of the arts...there corresponds a social hierarchy of the consumers (p.1)*

Drama is a teeny subject of course and must be seen to serve the wider interests of the particular and dominant ideology in the field of power if it to be given any legitimate space at all. Over time, shifts in the field of power itself lead to shifts in the field of educational policy, which in turn will impact on how drama manifests itself in school and beyond. This shifting and its resonances are being felt in Australia as the Howard years become history and in the UK we are beginning to sense the ground moving under our feet as New Labour loses its dominance in the field of power. If in any national system, drama ends up as part of English or as part of an Arts Education grouping, as skills centred or as focussed on knowledge and understanding, this is often due to political circumstances beyond the control of either a community of drama educators or a local school and its communities of learners and teachers. We take what we are given and use it as a germ to develop as many opportunities as we can for young people to engage with the art of drama and theatre; often despite the skin we are in. That's what we do. As Juliana Saxton reminds us in the preface to *Drama and Curriculum* (2009) the

excellent and comprehensive new publication from John O'Toole, Madonna Stinson and Tina Moore:

*The discussion of how drama has flexed and shaped itself to fit the latest curriculum fashion offers readers further evidence that ...drama has found ways – honest, inventive, and appropriate – to demonstrate how that fashion can be served.....But in our desire to get in the door, we can be distracted. In our anxiety to be heard, we learn others' language and sometimes forget the power of our own. In our efforts to make things clear for other people, we forget that the art we practice is, of itself, deeply complex. (p.viii).*

In what follows I want to try to reflect on the 'power of our own' and to remember the deep complexities and simplicities of the art we practice. I will do this through the lens of two texts that refer to examples of drama and theatre education practice which appear at first to represent quite different paradigms. Both examples are shaped by bigger picture national influences and broader pedagogic and historical traditions, whilst in my view also strongly asserting the common pedagogic and artistic 'power' and 'complexities' and 'simplicities' of 'the art we practice'. My argument is that the evidence of a common pedagogy is more important a distinction than differences in the genre, style of drama and theatre work being done. Drama of course, by itself does nothing. It is only what teachers do with drama that makes the difference. The work of drama teachers in very different corners of the field – process and performance for instance – can share in this common pedagogy. In my experience 'difference' in drama is more usually at the level of what is in the hearts and minds of teachers using drama rather than in technical differences of content and traditions.

### **Riding the mobius strip<sup>2</sup>**

I will start by presenting both texts. The first is from an article in the Times Education Supplement (12/06) on a school web-site in England<sup>3</sup>:

*At first Anna Jones is anxious. She realises creative thinkers and risk-taking problem-solvers will do better in today's world than those who just passively accumulate knowledge.*

*But asking her to teach history, geography and PSHE through drama three years into a career as an RE specialist - to help her students develop these skills? That is another matter.*

Elsewhere on the web site for this 'school of creativity with arts for all' in the North of England, the context for Anna's challenge is outlined:

*Cultural Studies is a ground breaking subject introduced at Kingstone for all Year 7 (11-12 y.o.) pupils, which encourages students to innovate and take responsibility for the quality and direction of their own work. Instead of a*

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<sup>2</sup> The Möbius strip has several curious properties. A model of a Möbius strip can be constructed by joining the ends of a strip of paper with a single half-twist. A line drawn starting from the seam down the middle will meet back at the seam but at the "other side". If continued the line will meet the starting point and will be double the length of the original strip of paper. This single continuous curve demonstrates that the Möbius strip has only one boundary.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.kingstoneschool.co.uk/culturalstudies/tes.htm>

*traditional diet of history, geography, PSHE and RE, staff teach topics which include all these curriculum areas. Students use drama techniques to help them learn while studying themes such as child labour and global poverty, British culture and identity, plots and protests.*

The second text comes from the centrefold of the programme for the Royal Shakespeare Company's *The Winter Tale* (Summer 2009 season) performed by an ensemble of actors on three year contracts with the RSC:

*Six actors from the ensemble performing The Winter's Tale are training to become skilled young people's workshop leaders..... by the time tonight's ensemble open the new Royal Shakespeare Theatre in 2011, a quarter of them will have completed this training and be actively involved in leading Shakespeare workshops with young people.....*

*The first day of training for this Winter's Tale ensemble brought the actors together with a group of young people from a girls school in London with a rich and diverse cultural mix. The day focussed on a journey of discovery into the characters of Hamlet and Ophelia stressing those themes of love, betrayal, identity and parental pressure which were alive for the young people taking part. By the end of the day the differences between pupils and actors blurred as the group began to take on the qualities of an ensemble committed to exploring the play through action and reflection. For the actors and the young people the journey was beginning.*

In the same week, I visited Anna Jones school in Barnsley and watched a session on child labour introduced by a young humanities teacher in role as a father in debt and poverty discussing his options with the class and also, later in the week, watched Joe Arkley, one of the six actors from the RSC, in role as *Antigonus* from *The Winter's Tale* ordered by *King Laertes* to abandon the baby Perdita to the wolves discussing his options with a class in role as fellow courtiers and advisors. Joe Arkley trained to be a classical actor, but realised that in order to share the pleasures and rewards of Shakespeare he also needed to become a workshop leader working with young people as 'participants' in a journey into the text rather than as a passive and unknowing, often reluctant, audience. Anna Jones trained to teach Religious Education, but realised in order to fully develop the life long and life wide learning needs of her students she would need to become an 'actor' working with young people as participants and co-creators in their learning rather than as passive and unknowing, often reluctant, audience to her instruction.

On the surface, these texts and examples seem to speak of different traditions. Anna Jones has been influenced by the recent renaissance of Dorothy Heathcote's ideas in England and in particular the *Mantle of the Expert* strategy which she has developed and which is now promoted by government agencies as an approved learning strategy for developing an integrated approach to curriculum design and delivery<sup>4</sup>. Anna Jones's school is one of many who have adopted this drama approach as a means of meaningfully integrating the curriculum for 11-14 year old students in particular<sup>5</sup>. Joe

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.mantleoftheexpert.com/>

<sup>5</sup> See for instance:  
<http://www.queensbridge.bham.sch.uk/index.php/home/yr7enterprise/pupil.html>

Arkley is influenced by the RSC Education Department's ensemble and rehearsal room based approach to teaching Shakespeare, summarised on the RSC web site as:

*The best classroom experience we can offer is one which allows young people to approach a Shakespeare play as actors do - as an ensemble, using active, exploratory, problem-solving methods to develop a greater understanding and enjoyment of the plays. Young people are up on their feet, moving around, saying the text aloud, exploring the feelings and ideas that emerge. There is a focus on physical and emotional responses, as well as intellectual, responses to the text. Active approaches are used to inform and test critical analysis. Pupils investigate a range of interpretive choices in the text and negotiate these with their teacher. Drama techniques are used to explore language, meaning, character and motivation<sup>6</sup>*

The drama work that Anna and Joe are developing has a recognisable and common pedagogic core that transcends the 'differences' between the professional and school models of drama and theatre work. Anna is using drama in the context of the humanities to make the curriculum breathe and to engage her students in journeys of discovery towards personalised and socially constructed 'truths'. Joe is using the same drama techniques to engage young people in a journey of discovery and interpretive choices in a canonical play text, which is also a great text to play with – to socially construct personalised 'truths' in their own playing of the text.

Joe comes from the theatre through an actor training route, but he does not lead voice and movement workshops for young people, or mimic an ersatz actor training course for them. He understands in common with Anna that subject-specific, or disciplinary, skills are more successfully developed in the pursuit of knowledge and understanding of the human condition. Anna does not isolate the humanities from the arts, Joe does not isolate the arts of theatre from the humanities. Both recognise that there must always be rich and relevant human content at the heart of theatre and drama. Rehearsals for the RSC include voice and movement training of course but also the kinds of socio-historical, political and literary research and inquiry associated with the humanities. As the late John McGrath (2002) reminded us, theatre teaches through its *paedia* which he identified as having three aspects:

1. *Its **accuracy**: the audience must recognize and accept the emotional and social veracity of what is happening on stage, must identify with the core situation, whatever style may be used to present it.*
2. *Its **relevance**: the core situation must reflect the central, most profound realities of its time, must speak to its audiences about a truth that matters in their lives, whether social, moral, political, emotional, or individual*
3. *Needless to say, the theatre must use all possible means to **reach** every citizen in the demos, and not itself act as an excluding agency, whether by the price of its tickets, the manner of its box-office staff, its location or its impenetrability.*

In both examples, the teacher and the actor are in a historical line of pedagogic theory that embraces contemporary Heathcotic drama education practices and cutting edge

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<sup>6</sup> [http://www.rsc.org.uk/standupforshakespeare/content/manifesto\\_online.aspx](http://www.rsc.org.uk/standupforshakespeare/content/manifesto_online.aspx)

rehearsal practices in the professional theatre. They both recognise what Dewey called 'the organic connection between education and personal experience' (1997, p.25). Following in this line that includes Dewey, but also Bruner, Vygotski, Donaldson and Freire<sup>7</sup>, both are working to make the curriculum – Child Labour, Shakespeare study – personal, relevant and connected for students. Both offer learning as an active experience that is cognitive and affective. Both use their expertise and artistry to give students choices and power over the direction of their learning.

Joe, in particular, recognises that every drama 'lesson' should be an artistic as well as an educational journey – his playing of *Antigonus* in a darkened candle lit studio, clutching a baby in a basket, is intended to create an authentic and felt theatre experience for the students. They are motivated to engage with Shakespeare's language through their existential engagement with the dilemma of the cruelly abandoned child. In the Cultural Studies class, 'coming to know' the father who is preparing to 'abandon' his child to cruel labour motivates them to identify with and explore the wider issue of child labour. Again we are in the line of an ancient tradition of drama and theatre with its origins in 5<sup>th</sup> Century BCE Athens. The philosopher, Cornelius Castoriadis (in Curtis 1997) explains that the political mindset of the Athenian Tragedy was universality and impartiality (p.284). Tragedies such as *The Persians* and *the Trojan Women* made heroes out of the Athenians' enemies even when they were at war. Through theatre and drama, in this sense, we come to recognise and feel for those who are different from us and in so doing we recognise our common humanity and their struggles become ours.

The pedagogic line underpinning the pedagogy of drama and theatre education has other contemporary echoes. *Mantle of the Expert* for instance is seen by the UK government as being a means of addressing an influential and substantial criticism from economists and employers about the irrelevance of narrow subject based curricula. In *The Creative Age* Kim Seltzer and Tom Bentley<sup>8</sup> (2000), for instance, argued that:

*Learners and workers must draw on their entire spectrum of learning experiences and apply what they have learned in new and creative ways. A central challenge for the education system is ..to find ways of embedding learning in a range of meaningful contexts, where students can use their knowledge and skills creatively to make an impact on the world around them. (p.6)*

Here we find congruence between the economic necessity for workers who can embed learning in meaningful contexts and make an impact with the pedagogic claims of *Mantle of the Expert*. There are other similarities in the argument of the *Authentic Achievement* project which was a key influence on the development of the *New Basics* curriculum in Queensland. Newmann (1996) defines *authentic achievement* as:

*The kind of achievement required for students to earn school credits, grades and high scores on tests is often considered trivial, contrived, and meaningless by*

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<sup>7</sup> My argument here is that the pedagogy associated with process drama in particular has not developed in a theoretical vacuum. The important characteristics of this pedagogy grow out of this line of social constructivist thought which further validate its efficacy. See for instance: Bruner 1975, 1996; Vygotski 1978; Donaldson 1987, 1993; Freire 1998, 2000, 2004

<sup>8</sup> Bentley is currently Executive Director for Policy and Cabinet for the Premier of Victoria, Australia, advisor to Australian Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard and part-time director of the Australia and New Zealand School of Government.

*both students and adults, and the absence of meaning breeds low student engagement in school work. Meaningless schoolwork is a consequence of a number of factors but especially curriculum that emphasises superficial exposure to hundreds of isolated pieces of knowledge. The term authentic achievement thus stands for intellectual accomplishments that are worthwhile, significant and meaningful, such as those undertaken by successful adults: scientists, musicians, entrepreneurs, politicians*

Again, it is easy to see how this idea connects with the work that Anna's colleague is doing, where students become 'experts' supporting the needs of children freed from labour. But Joe's work is also authentic in the sense that his students work as actors whose interpretive choices represent worthwhile, significant and meaningful intellectual accomplishments. It is interesting in any case to consider what the work of 'successful adults' in drama and theatre might look like and what kinds of intellectual accomplishments young people might be engaged in drama and theatre education. Maxine Greene (1987) offers a perspective which combines a pedagogic as well as artistic purpose:

*Artists are for disclosing the extraordinary in the ordinary....they are for affirming the work of the imagination – the cognitive capacity that summons up the 'as-if', the possible, the what is not and yet might be...They are for doing all this in such a way as to enable those who open themselves to what they create to see more, to hear more, to feel more, to attend to more facets of the experienced world (p.14)*

### **A pedagogy of hope, change and choice**

In both our examples, there is hope in the power of collective human agency to make a difference to the world. Both classes are offered a problem which can only be resolved through their own actions. In both cases knowledge is considered provisional, unfixed, waiting to be discovered anew. Action and acting are at the heart of the process drama tradition as well as the processes of professional rehearsal. In process drama nothing can happen unless young people take action, initially through their social participation in making decisions, taking on roles and inter-acting with each other, and subsequently by carrying through the choices that they make in relation to the developing 'plot' or 'situation' they co-author with the teacher/leader. In Joe's class, the students can act to influence the action of the *Perdita* sub-plot but they are also being encouraged through practical discovery and skilful questioning to make their own 'interpretive choices' as actors about how to play Shakespeare's language. They learn that his play texts are open to interpretation and that they can 'change' the playing of the play through their choices. There is here the hope that they may also learn that they can make interpretive choices in the wider world as well, including choices about who they might become or how the world might be re-imagined.

A pedagogy of hope-based-in-action that offers young people the possibility of 'futuring' (as Greene (1978, p. 173) describes it) and actioning a better world for themselves and others is essential to the work of Anna and Joe. Again this commonality is stronger than the technical surfaces of difference between using drama to teach Shakespeare and using drama to teach a social issue. It has resonances in the broader pro-social pedagogic tradition to which it belongs. With John Dewey for instance and his ideas about the necessity of a certain kind of liberal and social education for the progress towards participatory democracy (1997, 2007).



And Paulo Freire (1992) who first named the 'pedagogy of hope':

*I am hopeful, not out of mere stubbornness, but out of an existential concrete imperative. I do not mean that because I'm hopeful, I attribute to this hope of mine the power to transform reality all by itself....No, my hope is necessary, but it is not enough...But without it, my struggle will be weak and wobbly. We need critical hope the way a fish needs unpolluted water. (p.2)*

Within Western modernist aesthetics there is also a long tradition of ascribing personal and social transformations to drama and other kinds of 'artistic' experiences. From Ibsen to Brecht to Boal, Brook and Bond one can trace a faith in the idea that through artistic transformations of the stage, society itself can be changed. Within this modernist perspective we have become used, as Raymond Williams put it, to: '... the general idea that some relation must exist between social and artistic change' (Williams, 1961, p. 246).

In both classrooms, students are encouraged in imagining 'what is not and yet might be' and in deliberating on what kinds of actions will realise, or express in some material form, the 'yet might be'. They are doing this in social circumstances. Drama and Theatre is the quintessential social art form and this quality is also essential to its educational uses. People must come together in order to make and to share in its makings. It is the art of togetherness even if much of its content and form is about representing un-togetherness. Another common and essential feature of Anna's and Joe's work is the focus on creating high quality relationships for learning and being together.

The common term to describe this is 'ensemble-based' learning and this has been described recently by Neelands (2009), based on participation in RSC rehearsals and teacher led drama classes as having these key common characteristics; the uncrowning of the power of the director/teacher; a mutual respect amongst the players; a shared commitment to truth; a sense of the intrinsic value of theatre making, a shared absorption in the artistic process of dialogic and social meaning making (p. 183). Neelands argues that 'ensemble-based learning' is a bridging concept between those pedagogies of the rehearsal and class rooms, that centre on democratization of learning and artistic processes through high quality relationships for learning and living together.

In terms of the bigger picture of education, the idea of 'ensemble based learning' connects with the influential English cultural and educational thinker Charles Leadbeater's (2008) ideas about education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century:

*The route to a more socially just, inclusive education system, one which engages, motivates and rewards all, is through a more personalised approach to learning. Learning with, rather than learning from, should be the motto of the system going forward: learning through relationships not systems. (p. 72)*

The quality of relationships and the necessity of risk and trust are common to an ensemble based theatre company like the RSC. Geoffrey Streatfeild, who was in the previous Histories ensemble at the RSC described the ensemble in these terms which are very similar to the claims made for other forms of drama and theatre education:

*Our ever growing trust enables us to experiment, improvise and rework on the floor with an astonishing freedom and confidence. This ensemble is a secure environment without ever being a comfort zone. All of us are continually*

*challenging ourselves and being inspired by those around us to reach new levels in all aspects of our work.*

The making of relationships in drama and in the professional ensemble often requires the taking of extraordinary risks for all involved. The teacher/leader is taking risks in seeking a shift in the normative power relations within the class and between the class and the teacher and by even moving back the desks in some cases. Young people must make themselves vulnerable and visible in order to participate and must know that there is protection and mutual respect for difference from within the group to match the personal and social challenges of taking a part in the action.

In the face of the two realities which are constant for teachers of drama, that is that drama will never be top of the curriculum pile and nor can young people be forced or coerced to do it, they have developed a pedagogy of choice. In every drama class students have to make a positive choice to join in or not, without this willingness bred of interest and engagement there can be no active drama. Both the world of professional theatre and the world of classroom drama share this common feature that theatre has to be by choice. For this reason, drama has often been associated with a rich and engaging pedagogy. A pedagogy which turns the pedagogic and artistic traditions and lines it draws on into a contemporary praxis. In a very real sense what makes drama teachers like Anna and Joe important is that they are learning how to teach as if the students had the choice of whether to be there or not. And it matters to both of them that students would want to make this positive choice. Imagine if every lesson in every subject in the curriculum was taught as if the students had the choice to be there, or not.

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