

Youth Theatre

Drama for Life

Michael Richardson



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Youth Theatre

Youth Theatre: Drama for Life defines the youth theatre process, by outlining its constituent parts and explaining how these activities work in order to support young people's development. As well as describing what is done in youth theatre, it also explores why it's done and how to ensure the best possible outcomes.

The book is in four parts:

- Part 1 explores the nature and purpose of youth theatre, drawing on Michael Richardson's extensive personal experience as a practitioner and manager.
- Part 2 explains, in detail, the youth theatre process: warming up, playing games, voice work, developing skills, devising and the presentation of work.
- Part 3 discusses how to create an appropriate environment within which the youth theatre process can be most effectively applied.
- Part 4 covers the most common applications of the process, namely using it in different education environments; and in youth theatre productions and performance.

On top of this, *Youth Theatre: Drama for Life* includes appendices listing over sixty games for use in youth theatre and a recommended further reading section.

As well as giving key tips and advice from his own invaluable experience, Richardson offers comments from practitioners and participants on what makes a successful youth theatre experience.

Michael Richardson has worked in youth theatre for over twenty years. He has been involved in the training of other practitioners, and also in the strategic development of the youth theatre sector in the UK.

Tell me, and I hear.
Show me, and I remember.
Let me do, and I understand.

Confucius

Don't believe anything just because I am saying it;
Go out there and find out for yourself if it works.

Buddha

Foreword

I began my career as a director/teacher and workshop leader with Scottish Youth Theatre and throughout my career I have worked with many youth theatres. In so many ways, these times have been the most vital and fulfilling periods.

A youth theatre is an astounding entity! It brings together a diverse group of young people, all of whom are individuals with their own issues, and hopes, and challenges and dreams. It offers them a forum to express themselves in the most creative of ways, and it empowers them to be flexible, confident, articulate and assertive team players and citizens.

I first met Michael Richardson many years ago when he was Artistic Director of West Lothian Youth Theatre in Scotland. He struck me then as a confident and skilled practitioner and it is a delight to me that he has now chosen to share his many years of practice in written form. His book is a wonderful combination of practical and creative advice, firmly rooted in his research into youth theatre as a powerful and non-formal learning process.

The wonderful thing that this book clearly illustrates for us is the virtuous circle of practice that we see embodied within the youth theatre context. Led by adults who have been trained and worked professionally, the youth theatre sees the skills and experience of these practitioners infused back into the experiential learning of the young participants, who in turn process it, respond to it and develop their own practice. Many of them ultimately return to that context as leaders themselves in later years.

I've waited a long time for a book like this and I'm so pleased that it is Michael who has provided us with it.

Professor Maggie Kinloch FHEA
Deputy Principal, The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland
October 2014

Acknowledgements

This book is the summation of over 20 years of experience of working in youth theatre. Early inspiration came from the great practitioners and directors named in my recommended further reading list, and this was soon added to by practical experience gained in various training scenarios: from forum theatre to film making, *commedia dell'arte* to mask theatre, community music to Kodaly musicianship, numerous training situations have provided experiences and insights that together have influenced my practice and the way I think about it. To the many practitioners in different disciplines from whom I have been able to learn, too numerous to name, I am profoundly indebted.

Particular focuses of training have been the National Association of Youth Theatres, Promote YT (Scotland) and Firefly Arts. Here, as well as a wealth of training opportunities, I had the good fortune over several years to discuss and debate youth theatre with many practitioners from across the sector. Similar opportunities with European youth work professionals developed my understanding of youth theatre as both theatre work and youth work. All of these colleagues provoked the thinking processes that underpin my practice, and to them I am very grateful: particularly to Emily Chevalier and Rachael Duff, both of whom regularly challenged my thinking, worked with me to develop some of the techniques outlined in the book, and eventually made their own contributions to it.

Thanks are also due to the many young people with whom I have worked, especially at Shrewsbury Youth Theatre and Firefly Arts: collaborating with the participants in these organisations gave me the chance to learn to take what I had learnt from books and training events and apply it in a youth theatre environment;

and, particularly in Shrewsbury, to receive useful (and sometimes difficult) critical feedback which encouraged me to improve my practice. Thank you to all these young people, especially Eleanor Taylor, who was a useful sounding board as I started to write; and those who have been kind enough to write the short pieces from which I have quoted within the book: James Bourton, Stephanie Charleston, Charlie Johnson, Paul King, William Mitchell, and particularly Daniel Parker.

Finally, a big thank you to Ben Piggot and his colleagues at Routledge. Writing down the things you know is one thing, but turning it into a manuscript fit for publication is another, and without their invaluable help, advice and guidance, and the suggestions of my colleague Nick Thorpe, this book would never have come to fruition.

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Introduction

Why youth theatre?

I started working in youth theatre by accident. I relocated to England, and while looking for work opportunities I discovered that there was funding available to start a youth theatre in Shrewsbury. I had already been doing some opera education work with young people so I decided to give it a try, and Shrewsbury Youth Theatre (SYT) was born as an annual summer school. After the second summer it became a year-round venture, and its youth management committee was born. Further developments followed rapidly, and with regular feedback from my participants as well as research and attendance at training events I developed my understanding of the youth theatre process as described in this book.

Whilst still at SYT, I became the Regional Coordinator in the West Midlands for the National Association of Youth Theatres, creating networking and training events for practitioners from across the region. Subsequently I also developed and became director of new youth theatre provision at the Midlands Arts Centre in Birmingham. From my early beginnings in opera I was now working full time in the youth theatre sector.

I later moved back to Scotland to be Artistic Director of West Lothian Youth Theatre (later Firefly Arts). In this post I not only implemented what I had discovered in the Midlands; I also started to train other practitioners to successfully use the techniques outlined in this book. Eventually Firefly became a relatively large organisation, with up to fifteen staff and full-time volunteers, and I developed a fully-fledged training programme. At this time I was also Chair of Promote YT (now Youth Theatre Arts Scotland), the national development agency for youth theatre in Scotland.

Clearly youth theatre drew me in and for almost ten years I worked full time in the sector. For experienced readers it will

not be necessary to say that working with young people is both challenging and rewarding in a way that other theatre practice is not; and knowing that you can use your educational and creative skills to make a difference in so many lives makes it an excellent career option. But why is youth theatre so important?

In the modern world, adults and the establishment increasingly see young people with suspicion. The cliché of the hoodie-wearing gang member which grew in the early years of the twenty-first century gave young people an identity based on fear, mistrust and misunderstanding, and pigeon-holed the typical young person within a narrow stereotype, a source of trouble rather than a store of potential. To give a pertinent example, a 2007 newsletter published by City of Edinburgh Council highlighted new developments in work with young people: not additional participatory arts activities or extra youth workers, not even new schools, but extra police officers in Youth Action Teams, helping to keep the streets clear of troublesome teenagers. In fact no extra support for young people at all, just reinforcement of an unhelpful prejudice.

In reality, life for most young people is far removed from this cliché, and is dominated instead by feelings of pressure and personal stress. I have never myself been a strong advocate of indulgent structures that encourage teenagers to explore excessively their own feelings of angst, but even short conversations with young people today clearly demonstrate that the external pressures on them have increased in the years since I was at school, to the point that teenage anxiety is a very real issue. Indeed a major piece of research by the Nuffield Foundation, the Changing Adolescence Programme, showed that in the thirty years covered by the study, the proportion of 15/16-year-olds reporting that they frequently felt anxious or depressed had doubled (Hagell, Ann, *Changing Adolescence – Social Trends and Mental Health*, Bristol: Policy Press, 2012.)

A significant contributor to this increasingly stressful environment is the education system. Increasingly outcome-driven, it puts young people under great pressure to achieve academically, and to achieve for longer through engagement in higher and further education. In addition the emphasis on targets forces teachers to concentrate on examinations and other easily measurable outcomes, and there is little time left to offer the kind of broad education for life that produces the well-rounded and responsible adults of the future.

A second major contributor is our increasingly consumerist society. Most young people have a desire to fit in, to wear the

clothes of their clique, to own the latest technology. Peer pressure here would be enough of a problem, but consumerism also creates financial pressure, and many in their mid-teens are giving up valuable social time to earn money from part-time employment, an activity that can come to dominate evenings and weekends.

Parents are often unable to help with these pressures, as they do not form part of the experience of their own lives. Furthermore, in an attempt to do the right thing, they can allow their own hopes, aspirations, prejudices and fears to influence negatively the lives of their children. The Nuffield's Changing Adolescence Programme noted an increase in self-reported stress between the 1980s and the 2000s among parents of teenagers. Examples from my own experience include a girl who was unwillingly and unhappily vegetarian to appease a vegetarian father; and a boy whose social life was controlled by his mother's availability to drive him places, limiting his freedom because of her own perceptions (rightly or wrongly) of an increasingly unsafe society.

In many cases parents' own life experiences can compound the problem. Parental unemployment, relative poverty and lack of aspiration have their negative effects on young people, as do different pressures created by over-working parents. Separated parents can create difficulties however much they might try not to, young people forced to juggle the demands of two different families. For young people with parents who for whatever reason are unable to offer suitable support, or who are themselves failed by society, or who are unable to engage with the modern education system, the future is not very bright.

In summary, young people today find themselves in an unenviable position. As society changes they are forced to become increasingly reliant on adults – parents, teachers, employers; but at the same time they are unable to depend on adults and the structures put in place for them by the adult establishment. To add insult to injury, that establishment has created, and through the media maintains, an unhelpful negative stereotype that undermines young people at every turn. The life of a teenager, so new and free in the second half of the twentieth century, becomes more and more restricted and repressed with each passing year, young people increasingly limited by the adults around them.

In response, modern teenagers continue to retreat into the spaces where adults are less comfortable and have less experience. In my youth this meant public rebellion – sex and drugs and rock and roll

– but today it means a retreat into the worlds of new technology. Solitary activities, a life lived on PlayStation and computer games are commonplace. While both positive and negative impacts of gaming have been recognised by researchers, one clearly identified consequence is isolation: reduced time spent playing with friends, engaging with hobbies or using the imagination. Even interactive online gaming doesn't give real social interaction; and communication by text message or social media provides only virtual contact with others, but no opportunity to develop real social skills.

The result, unavoidably, will be a cohort of young adults whose main experiences have been highly structured, but who have had insufficient exposure to a range of social opportunities to allow for their appropriate personal development. Their learning skills will be limited to the ability to achieve a series of pre-defined outcomes, taught by rote. And their creativity and collaborative skills, so prized by employers, will be limited.

This view of the modern teenager may seem an exaggeration, but it is based in real experience. Each situation outlined above has been described to me at some point by a young person with whom I have been working, and it is certainly appropriate to argue that the environment in which young people live is not designed to support them to develop into the responsible adults of the future, but rather to contain their energy and enthusiasm so that they pose no threat to the adults of the present. This environment is changing quickly and significantly (again demonstrated by the Nuffield's Changing Adolescence Programme): there are economic and social implications of this that have impacted negatively on the well-being of young people, particularly on their mental health.

In two studies, Jean Twenge and her colleagues at San Diego University argued that these mental health problems are linked to two factors: young people having a decreased sense of personal control over their future; and young people increasingly pursuing external goals, that is the approbation of others and material rewards, rather than intrinsic goals such as one's own personal development (J. Twenge *et al.* (2010). Birth cohort increases in psychopathology among young Americans, 1938–2007: A cross-temporal meta-analysis of the Minnesota, Multiphasic Personality Inventory. *Clinical Psychology Review* 30, 145–154; and J. Twenge *et al.* (2004). Its beyond my control: a cross-temporal meta-analysis of increasing externality in locus of control, 1960–2002. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 8, 308–319).

In his book *Free to Learn*, Peter Gray developed this argument further, proposing that the factors identified by Twenge are causally linked to a decline in the opportunities for children's free play. He argued that play is controlled by the players and is directed towards the achievement of intrinsic goals; it is an opportunity to learn how to control one's own life. He further argued that the decline in free play is compounded by over-protective parenting and by children and young people spending an increasing amount of time within the restrictive environments of formal education (where choices are driven by the needs of teachers and the institution). As a reaction to this he called for another way, for more freedom to be given to young people to learn for themselves: something which they will do happily, and from which they will learn intrinsic values, develop more self-control and ultimately have better emotional health.

Of course Gray's other way does already exist, and can be found within different activities for young people, of which youth theatre is an example. In this book I will outline how youth theatre delivers creative freedom for young people and explore its specific function as a tool to support the development of personal, social, learning and creative skills by those who participate in it. I will describe the youth theatre process, using a practical approach to support theatre workers, teachers, youth workers and others who want to develop their abilities to deliver youth theatre activities. I will explain the constituent parts of the youth theatre process as I have experienced them, and the contexts in which they can be best applied. Former youth theatre participants, making contributions at the start of each chapter, will give an insight into some of the benefits that accrue from participation. And at the end, I will ask again the question *Why youth theatre?*, this time leaving it to colleagues to justify, in their own words, that youth theatre truly is drama for life.

Youth theatre, its nature and purpose
