

Towards a theory of  
**drama**  
in education  
GAVIN BOLTON



# Towards a Theory of Drama in Education

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*Gavin Bolton*

This book is dedicated to Norah Morgan,  
the brilliant Ontario teacher who through  
many beautiful summers hammered out  
this book with me long before we realised  
it was one.

# Introduction

This is not an academic book. It is backed only by personal experience, not by research. Nor is it concerned with giving tips for teachers. Anyone hoping to learn how to teach drama from it will be frustrated. Indirectly, however, I hope it will still help the inexperienced teacher, for it is a discussion of principles. It is with the student-teacher in mind that at the end of some of the chapters I have posed a number of questions.

In the main, however, I see the book as a continuation of a dialogue with experienced teachers, especially those teachers who have watched me teach and helped me to learn what I know – and what I don't know.

As an attempt to devise a theory of drama in education this publication is but a beginning – hence the appropriate tentativeness of the title. My guess is that whereas some aspects of my thinking will be productive, others will lead into a cul-de-sac. I am too close to the work at the moment to distinguish between the two. I look forward to the dialogue continuing.

G.B.

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# 1 Classification of dramatic activity

It is not easy to write about children's drama. As I put words on paper I see all kinds of actions of past drama lessons in my head. For the reader there is the danger that the words remain just as words or, worse still, become subtly stretched to apply to quite a different set of actions in the reader's head. I have attended so many conferences where, in the early stages, members have vigorously nodded to each other in mutual agreement only to discover much later that they have been speaking from totally different conceptual frameworks in spite of using the same vocabulary. I hope gradually to make clear the kind of educational drama activities that interest me. If these are completely outside your experience you may feel like a traditional mathematician reading a book on new maths or a formal sixth-form teacher attempting to study the principles underlying informal education in the primary school. I hope, however, that the uninitiated will be helped by the many illustrative examples throughout the book and that those who are already familiar with this approach to drama teaching will appreciate and benefit from the main purpose of this book, which is an attempt to clarify a philosophy of drama in education in order to sharpen its practice.

Although many able people have written about educational drama, I do not propose to use their publications as my points of reference. It seems to me this would trap me into a discussion of what other people *think* about drama, whereas I want to confine myself here to what theories may be drawn from a certain kind of contemporary practice. If I refer to other people at all it will, in the main, be from an appreciation of what they *do* in drama. Most of the examples of practice will be from my own teaching – the good *and* the bad. Sometimes it is easier to make a theoretical point from one's



mistakes, especially where those mistakes go beyond mere errors of judgement to wrong or misunderstood principles. I have made, and still make, many mistakes when working with children, but I happen to be blessed with those two contradictory qualities essential perhaps for all drama teachers – a humility to recognise my mistakes combined with an arrogance of certainty that I can not only learn from them but also abstract a sufficiently firm philosophy from the experience to write a book about it!

One of my strengths may be that I have taught drama in a variety of different ways. Teachers of my generation have been subjected to many different professional whims and fashions and I have been variously a drama teacher with a script, a tambour, a story, a record, or a list of mime exercises or jingles in my hand or, in the heady days of free expression, nothing at all in my hand – nor in my head either! Only more recently has my drama teaching become symbolised by a piece of chalk in the hand, but more of that later.

In this chapter I attempt a classification of the main kinds of drama experiences that are promoted in schools and colleges – not a conventional classification into speech, movement, improvisation, and so on. My purpose is to provide a reference point, so that if the reader has had any drama experience at all some of the activities in the list will be easily recognisable and when I later attempt to relate these activities to my present philosophy, a 'way in' to the different perspective will have been provided. The basic experience of drama offered to children and college students falls into three major orientations:

Type A: Exercise;

Type B: Dramatic playing;

Type C: Theatre.

It would be misleading for me to claim that these are watertight categories. It is possible to think of many instances which do not fall easily under a particular heading. Indeed I shall later be making the point that the kind of drama I am advocating (would it be useful to label it Type D drama?) can be served, albeit with a significantly different emphasis, by all three kinds of experience. I shall now analyse these

categories further, breaking them into sub-categories where necessary.

## **Type A: Exercise**

It is possible to distinguish five kinds of exercise in common usage in drama teaching. Some teachers tend to keep to a particular kind, for instance, games or technical skills. My purpose is to identify the chief characteristics of 'exercise' as a concept in drama. Below therefore is a catalogue of examples from which we can isolate distinguishing features.

### **I. Directly experiential**

- i Going into a dark cellar, i.e. in *actuality*.
- ii Interviewing people in the street, i.e. in *actuality*.
- iii Watching workers in the fish market.
- iv Listening to sounds outside in the street.
- v In pairs; one partner trying to stop the other getting off the floor by sitting on him.
- vi Any 'relaxing', 'limbering up' or 'concentration' exercise.
- vii Skipping to a drum-beat.

### **II. Dramatic skill practice**

- i Recalling smell of musty cellar.
- ii Working at a 'Richard III' walk.
- iii Imagining sounds outside in the street.
- iv Brandishing a sword (real or imaginary) so that it says 'Victory', 'Defeat', 'Revenge', 'Slaughter of the Innocents', 'Peace'.
- v Practising the intonation for role of a priest.
- vi Selecting the appropriate vocabulary and style of phrasing in preparation for the 'royal declaration'.

### **III. 'Drama' exercise**

- i To teacher's narration: 'And suddenly you find yourself in a dark cellar . . . you can smell the damp and feel the cold . . . when I tap the tambour you see something shin-

- ing in the corner . . . you hesitate . . . you move nearer' etc.
- ii A and B in pairs holding an 'interview practice, with one as interviewer and the other as interviewee.
  - iii The situation is: Daughter wants to leave home. Father disapproves; mother approves. Find out how your group deals with the problem.
  - iv I want you to act out the story I've just read (*The Pied Piper of Hamelin*) and see if you can remember everything that happens.

#### IV. Games

- i The active: 'Stick-in-the-mud'.
- ii The concentrating: 'Buzz'.
- iii The skilful: 'Chinese sticks'.
- iv The competitive: most ball games.
- v The group-cohesive: 'St Peter's keys'.

#### V. Other art forms

- i Tell the story so far.
- ii Write the story so far.
- iii Design the family crest.
- iv Draw what you think will happen when you enter the haunted house.
- v Composing the 'Peace' song.
- vi Creating the harvest dance.
- vii Taking a photograph of the slum street.
- viii Filming passers-by.

The above list of exercises, long as it is, does not cover all the possible types but there are enough examples for me now to discuss why all the above activities can be labelled as 'exercises'. Indeed many teachers whose lessons are made up entirely of such experiences would argue that they are doing drama with their classes, the implication behind their defence being that 'exercise' is an inferior category of experience. All three forms of dramatic activity: exercise, dramatic playing and theatre, have, in educational terms, their limitations and their strengths. This book is concerned with exploring in

what ways a teacher may use any of these forms so that the strengths are harnessed and the limitations reduced. It suffices at this stage to say that any exclusive use of a particular form invites a deteriorating educational experience progressively relying on the weaknesses within the form.

An extreme example of this occurred a few years ago when I discovered during the examination of a final secondary school practice not only that the drama students had prepared for my visit lessons made up entirely of games, but that games had been offered as the only material for drama lessons throughout the length of the school practice.

Let us examine what characteristics might distinguish the above activities as exercises. The reader should avoid putting a 'value' on these characteristics. They take on a value when the educational context is known. For instance, the fact that 'direction cannot be changed' (see no. 6 below) may make an exercise useful in controlling a group of scatter-brains but quite inappropriate for a group of rigid conformists. It will be noticed that a few features apply to all the types of exercises; others relate to certain types; yet others apply only some of the time; some are tendencies rather than static positions.

- 1 Always short-term; often there is a sense of completion.
- 2 Always a specific goal often known to both teacher and participants.
- 3 Sometimes an answer to be found.
- 4 Always has a 'cutting-off' point, when there is nothing to be gained by continuing, as the participants have reached the required goal. (It is interesting to note, in passing, how many teachers are reluctant to stop an activity although a goal is reached.)
- 5 Always some kind of instructions, most often preceding the activity, occasionally simultaneous (*see* IIIi), most often given by teacher.
- 6 It is always understood that the direction cannot be changed (just as in doing a spelling exercise it is not expected that the participant will switch to punctuation).
- 7 The 'rules' are usually clear.
- 8 Often it is easily repeatable. (Note this does not apply to

the more complex examples in I. Directly experiential.)

- 9 Usually there is clarity of outward form: an observer would normally be able to recognise fairly quickly what the exercise was about.
- 10 Usually the exercise is conducted in small groups, pairs or individually.
- 11 Sometimes the participants' mode of action has a 'demonstrating' quality: the action is *referring* to an idea or a resolution as opposed to 'experiencing'. (This is a very popular form of dramatic action in our secondary schools where in small groups the adolescents think up some social problem and translate it into dramatic form, *demonstrating* their thinking.)
- 12 Not normally associated with a high degree of emotion. (Note the possible exceptions here are Ii. and Iii.) There are unlikely to be surprises.
- 13 Most often requires the participants to apply a high level of concentration and energy until the goal is reached.
- 14 Sometimes problem-solving in form.

To the question, 'What is an exercise in drama?' there is obviously no simple answer. There is an amalgam of structural, educational and psychological features that distinguishes it from Types B and C.

Let us now look at the second basic form:

### **Type B: Dramatic playing**

Although later (in chapter 4) I make a distinction between children's make-believe play and 'dramatic playing', they are characteristically so close to each other that for the purposes of this chapter we can regard them as the same activity except that dramatic playing takes place in a school, has the blessing of the school and is often called drama by both children and teacher.

- I Fixed by place: Wendy house, hospital, fortress, supermarket, space-ship.
- II Fixed by situation: family life, school life, army life, camping.

- III Fixed by anticipation of gang-fighting: cowboys and Indians, Northern Ireland, Germans and Allies.
- IV Fixed by anticipation of elemental disaster: shipwreck, climbing Everest.
- V Fixed by story-line: *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*.
- VI Fixed by character-study. An extreme example of this occurred in an adult short-course where the students were asked to arrive 'in character' and to sustain those roles throughout the weekend.

I am sure teachers will recognise many aspects of this basic Type B drama. Let us look closely at its principal features.

- 1 Not limited to time; indeed 'when to finish' is rarely clear.
- 2 No specific goal; often no sense of completion.
- 3 Any limitations are imposed by consensus and are changeable.
- 4 The principal qualities are fluidity, flexibility and spontaneity.
- 5 The rules are not always clear.
- 6 The experience is not easily repeatable.
- 7 Lacks a clarity of outward form – an observer might find it difficult to recognise what it was about.
- 8 Usually conducted in small groups.
- 9 Often the mode of action is an intense 'living-through' (as opposed to *demonstrating* ideas) very occasionally close to life-pace. An existential quality.
- 10 Level of thinking often shallow, governed by 'what-should-happen-next?' mentality.
- 11 It does not *require* a high level of emotion and concentration but they sometimes occur.
- 12 Energy level is usually high.
- 13 Can 'survive' changeable degrees of individual co-operation and commitment.
- 14 Freedom for individual creativity; sometimes that creativity is stifled by the low common denominator of group consensus.
- 15 Three elements are necessary to the experience: a sequence of actions (plot); defined place or persons

(context); and a source of energy, motivation or centre of interest (hidden theme).

Whereas the list of features distinguishing Type A, Exercise, was an attempt to find the common factors in an extremely disparate collection of activities, Type B's examples represent a distinct activity for which it is comparatively easy to formulate a list of characteristics. The last item on the Type B list, the 'three elements necessary to the experience', is discussed further (in chapter 3) as the central characteristic of Type D drama. In this kind of drama there are always two levels of content: explicitly, the content provided by plot and context and, implicitly, the content provided by personal wants, beliefs, attitudes of the participants. This I have called the 'hidden theme'. For example:

*Plot-context*

- 1 Cowboys and Indians
- 2 High-jacking plane

*Hidden theme*

- Determination to win  
Wanting to show off 'acting' skills

It will be noticed that the 'hidden theme' in the first example is more compatible with plot and context than in the second. This fascinating area of compatibility of meanings is pursued later (in chapter 4) but opening up the topic here allows me to draw attention to a significant, perhaps the most significant, difference in emphasis between Type A and Type B drama. On the whole (there are important exceptions) a teacher working in Type A will tend to emphasise form whereas a teacher working in Type B will be more aware of content. It is the teacher who is aware of not the explicit but the implicit, hidden themes in his pupils' work who has the greatest chance of understanding the principles of Type D drama.

## **Type C: Theatre**

First let us examine the concept of Type C. Illustrations can fall nicely along an informal/formal continuum. Each example is concerned with sharing with an audience, for that is

what theatre is. It can be argued that the first example fails to meet that particular requirement.

- I The head-teacher or the class next door 'drop in' to see the children's drama work.
- II Showing each other plays improvised by small groups or (as in Exercise IIIiii), the resolution of a problem.
- III Working at polishing a story, say *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*, ready for an end-of-term showing to small or large, informal or formal audience.
- IV Working at a play script for the purpose of showing to an audience.

The principal features are:

- 1 Demand for clarity in speech and action.
- 2 The external features of the action must convey the meaning of the play or story.
- 3 Skill lies in pretending (naturalistic) or demonstrating (Brechtian) a reality.
- 4 Demands high degree of commitment and co-operation.
- 5 Strengths and weaknesses, *especially* weaknesses, become highlighted.
- 6 There is often a strong sense of an 'event', which positively affects both players and non-players in a school.
- 7 All work geared to the importance of the 'end-product'. Can bring exhilarating sense of achievement.

No survey has been done as far as I know on which of the three types of drama is the most popular. There is probably a sizeable proportion of drama teachers in this country who work exclusively towards Type C. The number of nativity plays, large-scale secondary school productions and the content of CSE and GCE syllabuses provide some evidence of this. But in my experience a great deal of theatre-type work is done as drama in schools even when there is no final performance in mind. Children are taught to perform *as if* there were an audience, that is, they are trained to look at themselves from the outside ready for their hypothetical audience. This kind of work is fed by books such as Penny Whittam's *Teaching Speech and Drama in the Infant School* (1977), where, although the author talks about 'free-expres-



sion', such a concept is denied by many of the exercises which take on a theatre form as she makes it more and more evident that she thinks in terms of 'externals'.

It will be useful at this stage to underline the main differences between the three types by taking an example that has cropped up in all three. I am referring to the very popular story form which teachers use in quite contrasting ways. I have deliberately instanced the same story in each list, *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*, so that we can make comparison. Now, if the teacher emphasises the importance of remembering the facts in sequence as a way of getting the children to know the story, or if the children practise scurrying round the hall soundlessly as rats, or if in pairs they design new rat-traps then the teacher is using exercise. If, on the other hand, the children use the story-line simply as a reference point for their own form of playing then they are in the more fluid Type B. If the children and teacher are concerned with communicating every action and sound to someone else (real or hypothetical) to give a faithful entertaining enactment of the story, then clearly they are working in theatre. Many teachers may use all three kinds of experiences. It is possible that the teacher who is working towards a production may use exercise and even free dramatic playing as early phases in the work. He might have his class experience the infestation of the Hamelin houses through their dramatic playing, thus claiming that he was working in process before going on to product. Unfortunately in practice, even if the teacher leans over backwards not to think in theatre terms for the early phase of the work, if the children have previously had any kind of taste of theatre they will almost certainly bring the memory of that particular perspective to the new piece of work. The teacher may legitimately want the children to experience the quarrelling of the townsfolk as an experience in itself, but the children may have trapped themselves into *demonstrating* a quarrel. The teacher may intend that they dance with uninhibited pleasure to the Piper's tune, but they are out to catch his eye for approval or they are wondering if the dance steps are 'right'. Or there maybe certain children in his class who persist in working in theatre