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Understanding Through Experiencing

Some Thoughts on Theatre Pedagogy

"It is commonly believed that there is a big difference between learning and having fun. The former may be useful, but only the latter is pleasant. [...] Actually, we can only say this much: between learning and having fun the contradiction need not be inherently legitimate, has not always been, and need not always be. [...] Theatre remains theatre, even if it is theatre for teaching purposes, and if it is good theatre, it is entertaining."

Bertolt Brecht

It is clear from Brecht's words, written in 1936 (Brecht 1969, 128-129), that the idea of associating theatre with education has long been the subject of debate over the role of theatre. If we want to clarify the concepts, it is not made any easier by the fact that there are several schools of thought regarding the nature of drama and its relation to theatre and education.

Even if we take as a starting point that by drama we mean the genre of literature that is determined by roles and dialogues, adding that in the dialogues there must always be a continually changing relationship that manifests itself within the framework of the situation, other questions may also arise, such as whether it corresponds to a written text or to a theatrical performance, or both.

Behind the thinking about the nature of "drama", and the use of terminology associated with it, there are four ways of approaching drama and theatre in the literature and in the practice of drama teachers:

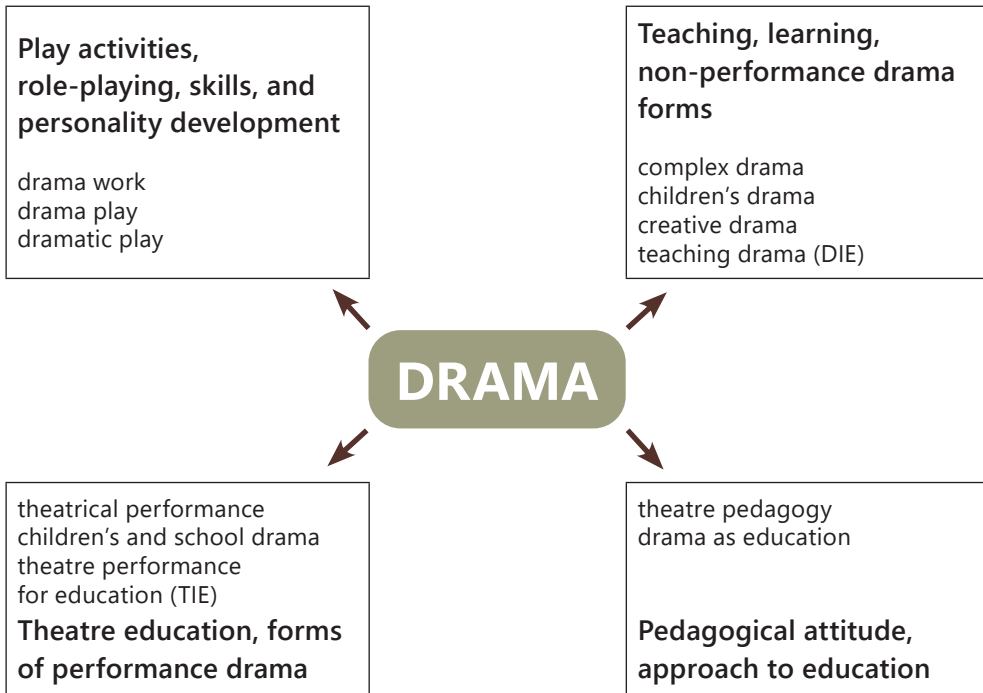


Table 1. The relationship between drama, dramatic forms, and attitudes (cf. Gabnai 2015, 417–440)

Depending on which term or denomination they prefer, this reveals the various ways in which people think about drama: they may veer towards theoretical foundations or philosophical questions, they may approach the subject from the perspective of educational theory, or they may see it as a tool, which is an effective method for developing skills, and learning rules or play activities in general.

Theatrical form is important in drama work that is performed by those on the other pole, but the fundamental difference is that more emphasis is placed on the theatrical side (that is, on the dramatic form of performance), than on educational activity. The latter also employs the tools and elements of the theatre (and here we mean not only the external elements, such as props and scenery, but also the building of the dramatic action itself, to heighten the tension), yet the goals are different. These tools are used for theatre education, attempting to prepare the child for receiving a theatre performance as a member of the audience, obviously providing an artistic experience, while

the other side focuses on understanding and experiencing the content within the context of the drama and the emphasis (here the content comes to the fore, and theatre tools are subordinated to this educational goal).

However one views drama through the lens of theatre pedagogy, it seems clear that it does not equate to the genre of literature, or knowledge of it. While its peculiarities, such as characters, dialogue, context and changing relations, may also be found in drama work, they are not treated as texts, but take the form of activity. Thus, it is not a transfer of knowledge, but rather a form of learning.

Drama work emerges during a specific activity, in a specific community, and always conveys new meanings. This way, we could also place our entire school education system on a new foundation and transform it for the benefit of the children, and we could consider it not as a system of tools, not as a method, but as a brand of education in itself. All school education and training could be based on such a foundation, since drama offers the most broadly applicable system of thought, an alternative approach to our vision of schooling.

This would require that we do not distribute and offer literacy material to children within the current curricular framework, thinking in terms of fields of culture and subjects, but rather develop a curricular structure that is extremely specific, focusing on systems of human relationships. We could practically guide students through the history of civilisation, in which the intriguing questions of humanity, the great steps forward or backwards, would be presented in a context of relationships and conflicts, in a personal way. This would map the journey of a child's personal development and awakening, the change of mindset and the path to adulthood. It would allow "philosophical" (existential and epistemological) questions to be raised and the appropriate forms of activity to be coordinated, and adapted to the age of the child and important for them at that particular stage of their life.

From each major era, we could highlight themes and ideas for which we can design contexts (for example, time and space, people and outstanding personalities) specific to a particular age, and these could be used as drama, in which children can undertake roles, while all other types of activities (technical or physical, for example) are adapted to the dramatic situations that we have developed and offered. This way, the fragmented system of subjects would also change, as we would come to think in terms of a unified whole.

In this drama-based structure, drama is also a working method, employed how and when we need it to achieve our educational objectives. This working

method is child-centred, drawing on the child's previous experience, using language that is adapted to the child's imagination, and which takes account the child's interests while motivating him or her to participate. It offers alternative ways of learning (dramatic activities, drama), and, by placing the child in a fictitious situation, it encourages the children to collaborate in an interesting and exciting situation, almost on their own, without any external teacher motivation.¹

Drama work, like all collective activities, socialises the participants. With a group learning method, the teaching-learning process traverses back and forth, with cooperation, decision-making ability, acceptance and empathy: its essence and benefit lies in the acquisition of these skills, and this represents the truest sphere of learning. It focuses on knowledge that is acquired in the social environment and uses imaginary situations in order to decipher the real world and our own selves (cf. Neelands 1994, 36–42). Fictitious situations provide protection, but in terms of their mechanism, they model real situations. Hence the real benefit is that the experience gained here can be applied to real situations. It represents an area of activity in which we acquire new knowledge, which is nothing other than a higher level of understanding of the dilemma at the heart of the matter, and which is accompanied by experience.

A fundamental dilemma in the encounter between theatre and children is posed by the extent to which the education system allows theatre into the school and encourages visits and collaborative work. In essence, it is the setting that separates the two problems. On the one hand, this is the field with which we want to familiarise pupils. Education can be achieved by bringing the child, the class, the school into the theatre, so that children may learn its language and its operation directly. On the other hand, there is the performance itself, what is being performed, and what problem is being addressed. This does not always require a theatre presence. If we consider the problem situation to which we want to introduce the children to be of greater importance, it can also be arranged for them to attend the presentation in the usual school space.

The problem of the setting is particularly important in solving issues related to theatre education in the upcoming period. Although it seems to be a simple question of space, in reality there are educational and theoretical considerations lying behind it. The question is how willing and able the school is to

¹ Ervin Németh's literature textbook *Irodalom Birodalom*, for grades 5 and 6, offers a drama-based framework that fits the above perfectly.

change its closed, strict structure in order to be able to meet the expectations set by curriculum requirements. After all, the National Basic Curriculum (NAT) includes drama as an area of literacy. In forming the general curricular requirements, the document also states the fact that theatre as an educational field represents an important part of children's education.

The problem is often that the school sooner chooses the option of going to the theatre, exposing the children to traditional performances, and familiarising them with the general rules of behaviour (wearing formal clothing, for example), rather than considering the benefits of hosting a special educational theatre performance within a school framework. For the most part, they see it as a problem, having to reorganise the school schedule, and arrange possible substitutions. Unfortunately, many believe that the best result is achieved by teaching the student how to attend a theatrical event, when in fact they are only sanctifying the somewhat reprehensible convention that by attending the theatre they imply that it is merely a social event at which the viewer relaxes and has fun, that is, one of society's entertainment mechanisms that is solely designed for that purpose.

Most schools do not prepare for internal events at all, although this is emphasised in the curriculum requirements. In the best scenario, a teacher of Hungarian literature "takes time out" from their class to discuss with the pupils what they have seen. In many instances, there is no mention of the awareness of the theatrical experience, any interpretation of the problems raised by the play, not to mention the gesture of "referring it to ourselves".

In other cases, if drama enters the doors of the school, it is not treated as a toolset, but as some type of methodological update and play technique. So often, all that happens in class is the performing of a series of exercises. Little is revealed about the fact that the dramatic work is about something, that it focuses on a problematic situation that may present an important moral or sociological issue for the children at that particular stage of their lives, or that its fragmentary elements are present in the work process.

Educational drama or educational theatre performances, which could function as a genuine forum, are only peripherally present in schools today: such performances are more common in Budapest and in the larger cities, rarely in small towns and scarcely ever in villages. There is a shortage of teachers in schools who can plan and direct educational drama. If there are any, the scar-

city of time slots, unrealistic curriculum and timetable arrangements, and inadequate school spaces present real obstacles to drama work in schools.

If we are to imagine future generations as members of a democratic society comprising a multitude of individuals who are willing and able to engage in public affairs, we must not forget what the Greek polis democracies created long ago: the theatre as a social institution plays an extremely important role in educating citizens to use the institutions of democracy. This role of the theatre should not be neglected today, which is why it is necessary to develop a truly effective and operational theatre education structure for children.

This would require rethinking the system for training and employing drama teachers, actor-drama teachers, and theatre educationalists, developing the infrastructure needed for effective work, and making the school system more flexible (for example, block schemes and theme weeks). It is also necessary to develop the optimal conditions for the creation of performances that seem to be the most effective in theatre education and for their access to schools (educational performances by independent so-called TiE companies, as well as permanent theatre companies). All this must be implemented in order to give every child the opportunity to experience understanding through theatre or drama.

Sources

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