

Questions, Changes & Challenges: The Quest for the Grail of Perfection in a Rapidly Changing Landscape

Emelie FitzGibbon

NAYD has traditionally prided itself on advocating a way of working which in its essence does not distinguish between good drama work in the classroom and the youth theatre workshop. The title takes the word 'drama' rather than 'theatre' precisely because of this. In a drama or theatre process we advocate or encourage an improvisational mode of work which follows the definition of drama established by



the Educational Drama Forum: 'the dynamic interchange and action between fictional personae in structured fictional situations'. We expect our theatre productions to be the presentation of that mode of working, just as we expect our sharing of improvisations in the classroom to be its manifestations. We aim to value the journey, the process of drama in schools and youth theatres. In valuing that journey of discovery we, necessarily, aim to value the potential for personal, social and aesthetic development in young people. We value the drama teacher, the youth theatre leader as creative facilitator of personal and aesthetic development and as an artistic shaper of the experiences of young people.

*Croatia participant at the European Youth Theatre Encounter in Jerusalem, July 2000.
Photo: Franz Fritz Vogel*

I think it is important after twenty-one years of existence to re-iterate at the outset where the organisation has based its clear philosophy of the encounter between the young people and the drama and theatre experience. This is because in a changing society we may need to look carefully at current practice and hold it up against this traditionally clear stance. Everybody in this field is in favour of 'best practice'. Sometimes, however, outside forces militate against it and sometimes - dare we say it - we need to look at and evaluate our own practice to see if we, for whatever reason, are complicit in diminishing the value of the exploration we advocate.

Is this just more of the whole process/product debate? Boring? Talked out? Unnecessary? Yes, if it merely leads to false oppositions. Yet centrally in NAYD we advocate a way of working which puts the integrity of the young people at the centre of a process valuing both exploration and artistic excellence. Furthermore, we claim that best practice in youth theatre and theatre/drama in schools achieves that balance. Perhaps, then, we need a new term to describe where theatre itself fits into the frame of this philosophy. What about 'theatre process'? In the creation of a theatre event through theatre process we are committed to value and encourage the young person's exploration of all the elements of that creation.

We, as directors, facilitate the exploration of the themes, issues, styles, structures embedded in the event, even while, as practising artists, we shape that exploration into the practice of art; we support the young person as maker by creating conditions of high artistic value.

Would you wander in the Maze of Superficiality or face The Fears...?

It seems to me that process, or if you prefer, empowerment and exploration, is at the heart of good practice in both spheres. It also appears to me that fear of drama - of real drama - is a serious danger found in both movements. Observing drama practice in some schools in England recently, I was struck by how skills-based, rather than drama-based, the work had become: the curriculum required pupils to 'know' how Forum Theatre functioned so it didn't matter at all what the topic was, what the engagement of the pupils in that topic was, what was the possible conclusion or the options for action. What mattered was that they 'knew how to do it'. Or take another class working, seemingly, on the topic of bullying. The students created a brief improvisation developed from a still image in which the once-bullied young person in one frame turned into the bully in another. 'Good work' said the teacher, 'that gives a nice balance to the scene'. Now it did, but it also gave a nice opportunity to get a bit deeper into the dramatic exploration of the provocative material supplied by the young people. They obviously wanted to explore this but, no, that was the end of that portion of the class because 'contrast is good in drama'. While in educational drama teachers seem to hide in 'doing strategies', the youth theatre danger seems to me to lurk in the safety zone of games. Games, of course, can be great ice-breakers, and the intrinsic game, the game which is actually laying the ground for subsequent developments by atmosphere, action, theme is a vital tool of imaginative exploration. Endless use of games, however, seems to spring rather from a desire to avoid the difficult stuff in favour of a somewhat hectic 'let's have fun' session.

What have we become afraid of?

Well, there are some legitimate bogey men lurking around. The one I think is the most disturbing is the lack of pre-drama skills which affects some populations of young people. Quite simply, many children in our society don't know how to play. They don't know the simple rules of imaginative play: listening, co-operating, small group negotiation, self-made rules, physical parameters, speculation, imaginative free-association, suspension of disbelief. A depressing study in the United States shows that many young children now have never been read to, sung to; that overuse of mechanical interventions in computers and TVs as substitute baby-sitters is creating a sub-population in which rules are never self-made, negotiation is unnecessary, co-operation irrelevant, and creativity confined. Without some of these, drama becomes impossible, a mere question of containment, its unique functions and modes became void.

What's to be done?

We need to face up to it, we need to devise pre-drama programmes, campaign for more access to creative play for children and for adults who have never been taught to play, so that they in turn can play with their own children. Most of all we, and our teaching colleagues, need to be aware of the possible absence of some of these pre-drama skills and, accordingly, not decide that the children are 'incapable of drama' but judge our programmes, our structures, our tempos to accommodate different rhythms of dramatic investment.

Can you allay the Nightmares of the Gatekeepers...?

Another danger we face is a fear of 'going too far', of offending the authorities, the parents, the funding bodies. Again it's a legitimate concern: we are all familiar with these drama workers whose idea of good drama/theatre process is emotional self-indulgence and high hysterics. Good drama practice, conversely, has control strategies in place: while recognising the danger of drama, it takes it to difficult

places with safety nets all around. What can we do? Again, not run and hide. We need to equip ourselves with skills to work safely as well as effectively, we need to update our information on new guidelines for working with youth, we need to be aware of our responsibilities, we need to reassure carers that we respect both the art and the young person. And then we - with the young people - need to take the drama on and prove that we're good at it.

Would you confront the Pressure of Reality...?

The changing nature of the lives of young people in Ireland has particular effects on the nature of the work we do in youth theatre. There has been a growth of part-time jobs and a demand for young people to fill them. This, added to their own desire for some economic independence, means that time spent in the youth theatre becomes for the erstwhile enthusiastic member premium dedicated time, time spent at the expense of money. Does that create a different dynamic? Is it easier to attract members for the quick adrenaline rush of performance-related activities rather than the regular workshop programme, the social give and take over the cup of coffee, the calm, down-to-work air of the exploratory, 'going-nowhere' but 'going where you want it to go' workshop? Does that mean that the push is now more towards performance rather than sustained development and is this fuelled by other factors?

Are you prepared to Change the Nature of the Grail...?

The time-pressure on members is reflected in the time pressures on leaders. In the past, the continuity and the dedication of a largely volunteer force - including arts professionals - ensured sustained and sustainable development. Now, however, the good leader has many more offers of work - in schools, in guest workshops, in professional work. Youth theatre becomes a non-income activity, a pressured activity and therefore an at-risk activity, one more thing to be done rather than to enjoy. No wonder the 'Games are Easy' workshops proliferate along with the 'Structures with no Drama' classes. What do we do about it? Perhaps, at the very least, not kid ourselves that what we're doing is the best we can do. Perhaps in pressured times, under massive external and internal pressures we can, at the very least, remember that drama and theatre are vehicles for challenge rather than conformity, modes for exploration as well as production and face the fact that a smaller high quality 'difficult' workshop is better than a crowded easy one. If we accept the model of behaviour that everything is easy and if we don't challenge ourselves to try 'the difficult stuff' we're in danger of devaluing and diminishing both the young people and the art.

And ask the Uncomfortable Questions...?

The changing dynamic in society has also pulled the youth theatre movement away from what had been a central core of volunteerism. More control has been put in the hands of professional workers, be they from the youth sector or the theatre sector. Is there a danger that youth theatres established by the youth sector would misunderstand the nature of youth theatre, seeing it simply as one of many ways to occupy young people without recognising the aesthetic qualities which are the sine qua non of youth arts? On the other hand, is there a danger in the sector led by professional theatre workers that a willing youth theatre is seen as an opportunity for career advancement, a chance to showcase directorial talents? With special project grants, grants for professional involvement - all of which are wonderful and potentially productive - is there a danger of losing the core value of the aesthetic and personal development of young people through an art form? Does it matter if in the process our young people are exposed to excellent professionals and produce quality work? I think it does. It risks diminishing a way of working where exploration of personal and social issues is held in equilibrium with exploration of a personal and group drama and theatre aesthetic, a theatre process in which the destination of

production is given value by the journey taken to reach it.

And when faced with the questions, the changes and the challenges some turned their backs on the journey, some hesitated and some walked forward to meet them headlong.

Theatre and drama with young people is about artistic values but it is not simply an imposition of these values on raw clay. The raw material of the art in classroom, workshop or theatre is the uniqueness of the young people and their artistic creativity. In drama or theatre process we facilitate, we shape, we support, we complicate, we challenge, we facilitate again this uniqueness and creativity in order to allow exploration to be at the heart of our practice, our art.

Don't we?

Emelie FitzGibbon is Artistic Director of Graffiti Educational Theatre Company. Her most recent educational drama work has been in Washington, London, Lucerne and Vienna working with students of educational drama and theatre. She has been active in NAYD for most of its existence and was Chairperson for 10 years.

No part of this article may be reproduced in any form whatsoever without prior permission from the writer or from the National Association for Youth Drama.