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Miracles are happening: beyond the rhetoric of transformation in the Western traditions of drama education

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This paper seeks out the gaps between localised accounts of drama's efficacy in terms of producing transformations in students' behaviours and sense of identities and the theoretical accounts of such transformations offered in the textual discourses of the field of Drama in Education. Drawing on a range of post-colonial and emancipatory discourses the paper tentatively suggests certain pre-conditions in the pedagogic and artistic intentions of drama practitioners that might indicate that personal and social transformations in drama could be the rule rather than exceptional 'miracles'. These pre-conditions include a rejection of 'domesticated' and intra-aesthetic pedagogies of drama in favour of a socially committed pedagogy that regards students and the realities in which they dwell as 'unfinished' and 'waiting to be created'.

Witnesses and testaments: from anecdote to rhetoric

There are, of course, localised testaments to miracles happening in, or as a result of experiences in drama education too numerous to mention here. From the perspective of the classroom practitioner a continuing faith in the efficacy of drama education is often encouraged by the 'miracles' of particular students 'discovering' a voice in drama, or students considered dysfunctional within the system who find some sort of 'home' in the drama classroom that allows them temporarily to lower their barricades and reveal 'hidden' sides to their characters.

I use the term 'miracles' here to describe accounts of events which claim some profound and new change in a student. Such miracles can also function as symbols of hope and faith within the struggles of everyday classroom life. They can also be treated as 'holy' and 'scriptural' in their cultural usages. Miracles can and do happen.

These localised stories of hope are echoed sometimes in the claims of researchers and others in the field whose hero narratives include evangelised reports of personal victories in making miracles happen against all odds. These stories, embedded in the

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liberal humanist tradition, become the ‘proof’ of drama’s efficacy in resolving a range of ‘problems’ which might include various forms of student dysfunctionality or student resistance to the orthodoxy of the school’s curriculum plan and practices.

Here, I am referring to those neo-realist narratives that cling to the imageries and metaphors of the researcher as discoverer/finder rather than as of constructor/maker (Smith & Deemer, 2000). Those voices, which, in Schwandt’s phrasing, have not:

Learn[t] to live with uncertainty, with the absence of final vindications, without the hope of solutions in the form of epistemological guarantees (Schwandt, 1996, p. 59).

Textbooks on drama teaching can also mythologize the potential efficacy of drama education by using tautology as a rhetorical device (Barthes, 1976). For instance:

Drama, then, teaches in the following way. Taking a moment in time, it uses the experiences of the participants, forcing them to confront their own actions and decisions and to go forward to a believable outcome in which they can gain satisfaction (O’Neill, 1984, p. 99);

or

Drama is powerful because its unique balance of thought and feeling makes learning exciting, challenging, relevant to real-life concerns, and enjoyable (Wagner, 1998, p. 9).

Drama cannot, of course, of itself teach in any kind of way, nor can it, of itself, be powerful. It is what we do, through our own human agency, *with* drama that determines the specific pedagogy and specific powers that these examples of rhetorical elision ascribe to the idea of drama itself. Drama is not, of course, natural. It does not take a natural form, nor does it naturally have certain kinds of purposes and effects. What is hidden in the claim that ‘drama is powerful’ are the distinctive and preferred values, ethics and aesthetics of the author and how these socially constructed subjectivities have shaped pedagogical actions, intentions and the interpretation and presentation of the efficacy of the ‘results’ or effects of drama.

Attempting to ‘naturalise’ specifically cultural drama and theatre practices and pedagogies in this way masks complex histories of struggle between dominant and dominated cultural and political formulations (Williams, 1961; Barthes, 1976; Bourdieu, 1984). Drama can only be used to serve rather than determine human intentions.

There is a gap, I think, between the very ‘real’ local instances of drama being used in ways that, from a local perspective at least, transform particular students in particular ways and how these instances are generalised and theorised or ‘proved’ in the textual discourses of the field. Any local instance of a ‘miracle’ is intensely contextualised through the lived and shared experience of those closest to the ‘miracle’. The scale, the surprise of the ‘miracle’ is mediated, and perhaps verified, by local knowledge of the school, the classroom, the teacher, the student, and the family. The miracle will seem ‘truest’ (plausible/credible) to those who are closest to it. As the communicative distance increases it becomes another anecdote, just another rhetorical example.

Of course these local instances, communicated orally to those who share the same context, can also be seen as potent theories about the teacher’s and her community’s paradigms of drama, education and change. The particular story of a particular

student's 'transformation' through drama experiences provides insights into the subjectivity of the pedagogic exchange and its meaning both for the teacher and the child. But stories-as-theories about the world hang on the bottom rung of the hierarchy of research methods in the Western world (Christian, 1987).

Drama as a transforming art: from primitivism to modernism

The problem then, is to find ways of theorising the possibility of personal and social changes and transformations through drama experiences in ways that go beyond advocacy and rhetoric and which acknowledge the relativism of context. This theorising needs to offer a lens for describing the conditions, or ground, in which teachers using drama might come to expect rather than be surprised by 'miracles'. From an ethno-methodological perspective, this paper seeks to clarify the 'how' (processes) and 'why' (purposes and intentions) as well as the 'what' (impacts and effects) of the transformational effects of drama experiences (Foucault, 1980, 1988; Abu-Lughod, 1991).

Of course, there is already a 'common sense' expectation (and resistance) found in different cultures that drama/theatre/performance will be transformational. It is a *sine qua non* in different domains of performance and cultures of performance that within the event of artistic performance there will be partial or total transformations of time, space and human presence for instance (Turner, 1974, 1982; Schechner 1988, 2002).

There is also a tradition in structuralist anthropology, deriving from the work of Levi-Strauss, Van Gennep and Eliades, of ascribing 'actual' inter- and intra-personal transformations in the social domain to rituals, rites and performances amongst peoples living on the 'outside of modernity', to use Spivak's phrase. But these accounts of 'actualising' through performance are often conditioned, or exoticised, by a sense of 'primitiveness' or 'innocence' that places the anthropological subject as the 'other' from a sovereign-Western perspective (Spivak, 1988).

Within Western modernity 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).

What does appear, then, to be shared in different cultures, even if it is translated differently, is another common sense expectation; that the transformations of performance may, as Schechner (1998) has suggested, have both personally and socially efficacious and aesthetic and socially entertaining intentions, purposes and, according to certain conditions, results. And of course, to suggest that there is some conceptual distinction to be made between the social and the aesthetic is in itself a cultural translation embedded in Western sensibility. In other non-Western cultural systems there may be no such 'division' of consciousness; the aesthetic is subsumed in the social (Geertz, 1975, 1983).

So in a sense, at the level of artistic intention, there can be an expectation amongst those using drama in educational settings that changes and transformations will occur

during drama experiences. Students will in some way be asked to imagine themselves ‘differently’ and to behave ‘differently’—to take on roles and characters which take them ‘beyond’ themselves. They will explore ways of transforming time, space, gesture, voice and movement in order to convey a concrete sense of an ‘other’ persona, time and place (Neelands, 1998, 2002).

What is more difficult to know is whether these artistic transformations can be said to also affect the broader socio-cultural domain. What are the ‘certain conditions’ for results and how are they formed? What is the ground, the context that might best be suited to the possibility that through experiences in drama young people and their societies might also be transformed in a social and in a geo-political sense?

This questing embraces Geertz’s assertion that:

What this implies ... is that the definition of art in any society is never wholly intra-aesthetic ... The chief problem presented by the sheer phenomenon of aesthetic force ... is how to place it within the other modes of social activity, how to incorporate it into the texture of a particular pattern on life. And such placing, the giving to art objects a cultural significance, is always a local matter (Geertz, 2000, p. 97).

In this initial exploration of these questions, I want to attempt to outline the first cutting of a theoretical terrain, which might both support the possibility of personal and social transformings through drama and also provide a set of heuristics for discussing the local context and conditions in which these transformations are claimed.

Towards a para-aesthetics of drama

To begin with it makes sense to suggest, in common with the modernist, Euro-American, avant-garde of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, that the use of drama is more likely to affect the social space if drama is seen as part of the social space rather than outside of it, or removed from it. This suggests a possible pre-condition for personal and social transformations through drama; that there is an expectation that drama will be used to explore, question and comment on the social world. A focus on the possibility of theatre being, as George Bernard Shaw suggested:

A factory of thought, a prompter of conscience, an elucidator of social conduct, an armoury against despair and dullness and a temple in the Ascent of Man (Shaw, 1906, p. xxiii);

or, drama being used as Boal urged to ‘influence reality not merely reflect it’ (1979, p. 167).

This pre-condition that drama exists as a part of our social world rather than removed and isolated from it suggests that there is a distinction to be made in terms of pedagogic alternatives. Intra-aesthetic approaches which isolate students’ experiences of drama from the broader social and cultural worlds in which they dwell may tend towards valuing, and therefore give primacy to, students’ artistic and technical skill development. Para-aesthetic approaches which acknowledge the social/artistic dialectic and which are intended to develop a broader range of social and cultural learning may tend towards giving priority and primacy to the personal and social development of the students.

There will be differences of effect, function, intention and discourse between those intra-aesthetic pedagogies of drama, which tend to isolate aesthetic learning from the broader social sphere, and pedagogies that focus on the 'between' of the artistic/social spheres, or which take us 'beyond' the nomothetic and culturally determined binaries of the social and the artistic.

This is because intra-aesthetic pedagogies are seen as less fertile ground for personal and social transformations; such approaches are intended, as Bourdieu has suggested, to 'fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences' and to serve as an:

affirmation of the superiority of those who can be satisfied with ... sublimated, refined, disinterested, gratuitous, distinguished pleasures (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 7).

The alternative is to seek out the parameters of 'para-aesthetic' pedagogies which might go beyond what Geertz refers to as the 'surface bootlessness' of aesthetic formalism (2000, p. 95); to seek pedagogic positions and desires that are intentionally located in the shifting borderlands of the social/artistic in ways that blur or confuse the comfortable and leisurely distinctions between art and work, aesthetics and politics of Western sensibilities.

From an epistemological perspective, intra-aesthetic pedagogies are also a means of 'domesticating' drama (Friere, 1973, 1985); a means of transferring, and 'naturalising' 'knowledge' about drama in ways that mask and neutralise the pervasiveness of a dominant Western ideology which authenticates social differences through its ownership of cultural traditions and systems of representation (Barthes, 1976). In contrast, alternative drama pedagogies that are located in the counter-cultural interstices between (inter) and beyond (para) the 'artistic' and the 'social' appear to at least be better prepared for the possibility of personal and social transformations at a geo-political level.

Homi Bhabha suggests that:

Forms of popular rebellion and mobilisation are often more subversive and transgressive when they are created through oppositional cultural practices ... (1994, p. 20).

... The borderline engagements of cultural difference may as often be consensual and conflictual; they may confound our definitions of tradition and modernity; realign the customary boundaries between the private and the public; high and low; and challenge normative expectations of development and progress (1994, p. 2).

Becoming conscious: the pedagogic tradition of the oppressed

This counter-cultural and transformational paradigm of artistic practices finds its echo in the 'emancipatory' pedagogy of Friere (1973, 1985, 1998). Friere makes this distinction between the pedagogic traditions discussed here:

In essence, one of the radical differences between education as a domesticating and de-humanising task and education as a humanistic and liberating task is that the former is a pure act of transference of knowledge whereas the latter is an act of knowledge ... In its relationship to consciousness and the world, education as a dominating task assumes that consciousness is and should merely be an 'empty' receptacle to be 'filled'; education as a liberating and humanistic task views consciousness as 'intention' towards the world (Friere, 1985, p. 115).

What I'm suggesting is that 'transformations' are more likely to occur in artistic and pedagogic positions that are intended to produce change—where there is an expectation of change. Within artistic and pedagogic discourses that acknowledge and dwell in post-modern time and post-colonial space, these positions are more likely to be located within the 'tradition of the oppressed' (Bhabha, 1994, p. 41) speaking, in Fanon's phrase, for the 'wretched of the earth', for whom political and cultural change and the idea of transformational education are imperatives, not by-products. These marginal position-takings stress, for instance, that the state of emergency in which 'we' have lived since 9/11 is, as Benjamin suggested, not the exception but the rule (1969, p. 257) and that a state of emergency is also a state of necessary *emergence*.

Within these post-colonial positions there is a lived awareness that the 'culture of power' works both through educational systems and through systems of representation (Said, 1987; Slemon, 1994) and that both must be subject to critique and 'de-colonisation'. As Lisa Delpit suggests, those who belong to the culture of power are least aware of it, those who do not belong are most aware of it. Intra-aesthetic pedagogies tend to ignore or are ignorant of the culture of power (Delpit, 1995, p. 24). Alternative pedagogic/artistic positions seek to both unmask and to de-stabilise the comfortable stasis of that culture of power:

It is that third space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbol of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, re-historicised and read anew (Bhabha, 1994, p. 37).

The world is to be created: post-colonial perspectives

If the first pre-condition, or contour, of transformational learning is formed around a commitment to artistic/pedagogic positions that insist on a change of balance and contra-flow in the normative 'knowledge/power' equation (Foucault, 1980), then the second pre-condition is a refusal of certainty and completion. This condition is also to be found across a wide range of 'discourses of the oppressed'. It finds an early expression in the writings of Fanon, for instance:

We must join the people in the fluctuating moment which they are just giving shape to ... it is to this zone of occult instability where the people dwell that we must come (Fanon, 1967, pp. 182–183).

Fanon's imaginary of the 'zone of occult instability' challenges what Bhabha calls the 'historicist, teleological or mythological time and narrative of traditionalism' (1994, p. 35). It denies fixity and completion, it stresses, the here of now (the political space of the instant) and the possibility of re-historicising, re-shaping, re-negotiating, re-translating personal and social identities in the margins of then and now, self and other.

Fanon represents the present as a 'fluctuating moment', a space of emergence from the past, not as a continuation of it. This processual, asymmetrical, indefinite conception of a present that seeks the 'hither side of the future' in Bhabha's phrase, is a trope in post-colonial pedagogies and aesthetics. Friere for instance, identifies amongst the first conditions of necessary knowledge for those who have been 'betrayed' by history the possibility that:

... the future is seen not as inexorable but as something that is constructed by people engaged together in life, in history. It's the knowledge that sees history as possibility and not as already determined—the world is not finished. It is always in the process of becoming (Friere, 1998, p. 72).

This stress on human agency and becoming finds its echo in Bhabha's assertion that: 'The people always exist as a multiple form of identification waiting to be created and constructed' (1994, p. 220). In the British tradition of post-colonial cultural studies we find the same insistence on processes of re-interrogating and re-translating self and other identities. For instance, Stuart Hall argues that:

Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything which is historical they undergo constant transformation. Far from being externally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to that continuous 'play' of history, culture and power (1990, p. 220).

This paper began with a quest to theorize the ground and conditions in which local instances of personal change and transformation, or 'miracles', are claimed. It comes to the suggestion here that in a pedagogic context that stresses 'becoming', that sees students as human 'becomings' rather than human 'beings', that views human potentiality as a project rather than as an essentialised and contained given, 'miracles' are not the exception but the rule.

'Miracles' are rare only when we expect a transformation from one fixed and complete identity to another equally fixed and completed identity. If the pedagogic premise is that we are in a process of continuous transforming and (re)shaping of who we are and who we are becoming, then of course such 'miracles' lose their rarity and become part of our everyday expectation.

Going beyond 'ourselves': acting 'otherwise'

The third pre-condition that I want to describe is related to the uses of drama within the kind of pedagogic climate and intentionality outlined above. We find, inscribed in the post-colonial critiques of identity, other tropes that are useful in helping to articulate a socially transformational drama practice. Hall speaks of the 'play' of history, culture and power; Fanon of 'fluctuating moments' and 'occult instability'; Bhabha of going 'beyond' ourselves in order to return in a 'spirit of revision and reconstruction to the political conditions of the present' (1994, p. 3) in what he terms as 'the intervening space beyond'.

Can drama be used as the means of physicalising and corporalising the 'play'? Can we capture the flux of change in drama's essential ephemerality? In the collision of actualities/realities/fictionalities between the stage and the social space, can there be that sense of 'instability' between what has been, what is and what might be?

In temporal terms, Western forms of drama often work in what Suzanne Langer calls a 'virtual future' in the literary mode of 'destiny':

But drama presents the poetic illusion in a different light: not finished realities, or 'events', but immediate, visible responses of human beings, make its semblance of life. Its basic abstraction is the act, which springs from the past, but is directed toward the future, and is always great with things to come (Langer, 1953, p. 306).

This mode of ‘destiny’ seems particularly suited as a means of capturing flux, process and the sense of ‘unfinished realities’. This mode may also provide a means of concretising Bhabha’s imaginary of the ‘unrepresentable’ third space that is the grounded pre-consciousness enveloping inter-cultural communications.

In Bhabha’s thesis such encounters always contain an articulation of difference which is (trans)formative—we may perceive self–other in such encounters and behave according to the metaphors of self–other embedded in colonised ‘traditions’ but in our acts (and acting) we also, through our agency, shape our becoming; our destiny. In the same way the agonistic tradition in Western drama may also serve as a means of articulating and modelling difference in ways that are not consensual or seeking assimilation but which present the co-existence of conflictual and often antagonistic social and cultural differences as a ‘reality’ of post-colonial public life.

There is a live(d) hybridity in the process of artistic acting which may also serve the intentions of a transformational pedagogy. In Schechner’s (1988) classic phrase, my artistic performance of a ‘character’ is ‘not me, but not-not me’. As students building characters or taking roles struggle to present themselves as ‘other’ they are caught ‘between’ their differencing of ‘self’ and ‘not-self’; they are playing out their psychophysical and lived constructions of *alterity*:

Alterity refers to the alter-ego category of otherness that is specific to each culture’s metaphor of the self (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 262).

In artistic acting this psychophysical differencing becomes provisional, unstable, and transmutable. In a socially committed pedagogy of drama these artistic (or signifi-catory) struggles to re-negotiate and re-translate inherited cultural perceptions and (un)realities of self and other can also be addressed as necessary and transformational struggles in our social lives beyond the studio or workshop. As Bhabha suggests:

It is only by losing the sovereignty of the self that you can gain the freedom of a politics that is open to the non-assimilationist claims of cultural difference (1990, p. 213).

In acting ‘differently’, in acting ‘as-if’ the world was otherwise, students may be encouraged to discover that at personal, local, national and inter-national levels they are free to negotiate, translate and therefore transform the problem of identities and the problem of the representation of identities in what Bhabha calls a ‘discontinuous intertextual temporality of cultural difference’.

Living on the edge: the place of drama

There is perhaps a further suggestion of an intentional ‘hybridity’ deriving from the very marginality of drama in most Western educational systems. Does drama’s space in the boundaries of the curriculum, its marginalised status, give it the opportunity to be the site for going ‘beyond’ the ‘Curriculum’ in counter-cultural and pedagogic terms? Can it be a site for the enunciation of alternative lived encounters with ‘reality’ that may transgress, or unmask, the ‘truth’ of the ‘Curriculum’?

If the experiences of drama are intended to be *inter-curricular*, rather than cross-curricular—located in other words in the interstices between the ‘facts’, ‘knowledges’

and sense of nationhood legitimised and neutralised in the Curriculum Plan and the plurality of lived experiences, enunciated in the drama space, that question both the legitimacy and the omissions of the school curriculum—then students may find themselves moving between the illusionary reality of the normative curriculum and the reality of the illusions they create in drama so that their experience of the Curriculum is also transformed by the ‘alterity’ of their experiences in drama.

For those whose professional lives and career paths are inter-twined with their uses of drama in school settings this suggestion that we should celebrate the marginality of drama in schools as a barricade against ‘domestication’ and ‘governmentality’ may seem cruel. But there is something in the metaphor of the lonely hut or mobile building reserved for drama in the borderlands of the school landscape that appeals. Particularly if, as a result of the miracles that are happening in the hut, students emerge from the periphery to the core, understanding the ‘others’ in themselves.

Notes on Contributor

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