

EDITORIAL

Mending the Fabric of Life

The fabric of our life is made of care, solidarity, mutual service.

-- Piero Ferrucci (Ferrucci, 2016)

At the turn of the decade, different parts of the world including Hong Kong were plagued by the COVID-19 pandemic, together with the wickedness and brutality of the authoritarian-leaning governments. In times of crisis when humanity is at risk, applied drama/theatre practitioners and educators, like many other professionals and scholars who care, ask what we could do with our art form in response to the extreme socio-political conditions.

I thank the authors in this volume who contribute to our ways of seeing and thinking creatively with what applied drama and theatre education could do in face of the crises of our time. The volume includes a special collection of four local Hong Kong drama/theatre practitioners' reflections of their works before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, and a case study research of drama in primary school moral education in mainland China.

The Special Issue: Local Practitioners' Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc on personal and social life around the globe and changed spatial practices of society substantially. Large scale social distancing measures, the obligation to wear masks, lockdowns and school closures have changed the way humans relates to one another personally, socially and politically.

Hong Kong is no exception. The city was hit by COVID-19 in January 2020 two months before World Health Organization (WHO) announced it a pandemic (WHO, 2020). To contain community outbreak, extensive social distancing measures were imposed including banning public gatherings of

more than four people (the strictest was two), closing public libraries and other sports and cultural venues, and making quarantine mandatory not only for inbound travellers but also for people who have close contact with confirmed cases. Schools at all levels from kindergartens to tertiary institutes were closed, and classes were mainly conducted online. The measures were lifted but reinstated in stricter manners when new waves of confirmed cases spiked. At the time I was writing this editorial (April 2021), the Education Bureau had just announced that face-to-face classes from kindergartens through to secondary schools would be gradually resumed in April following the Easter break. By then, schools would have already suspended for most children for five months since December 2020.

In the context of the pandemic, the papers collected in this special issue go under two themes: drama and mental wellbeing, and web-conferencing technology and applied drama and theatre education.

Po-chi Tam has been supporting kindergarten teachers in using drama with young children long before the COVID-19 pandemic. Under the pandemic, Tam developed a special drama programme with the industry partner to prepare kindergarten teachers to resume face-to-face teaching when schools reopen. She has observed that the drama work has the quality of lifting teachers' spirit in face of suffering, hardship and crisis coming along with the pandemic. In her paper, with reference to the biblical notion of "transfiguration", Tam conceptualizes the redemptive dimension of process drama in addressing the spiritual, emotional needs of adults and children, and lays out the conditions for possible dramatic transfiguration to come about. The attempt is to add the spiritual dimension of drama work that is less discussed and explored into the existing practices of drama as transformative education.

Cho-kin Chan adopts drama therapy to promote mental wellbeing of children and their families affected by traumatic experiences. He also concerns the mental wellbeing of children and adults under the prolonged periods of extensive social distancing measures. Chan proposes in his paper

that parents adopt games and dramatic role plays to improve parent-child relationship and to ease the emotional and mental strain caused by prolonged confinement at home under the pandemic. He maintains that the interactive nature of dramatic games helps both the parent and the child to come back into their “Window of Tolerance”, and as such, regulate their own emotions alone and together with others.

For two decades, applied drama and theatre practitioner-scholars have been exploring the relations between the dramatic arts, technology, and the digital culture (Carroll et al., 2006; Anderson et al., 2012a, 2012b). Efforts have been made to move from seeing technology and drama in binary oppositions to positioning and integrating technology critically within drama education. The purposes of such attempts are to build deep learning, create students’ agency and enhance their development in Communication, Collaboration, Creativity and Critical Reflection (4Cs) (Anderson et al., 2012b; Anderson, 2021).

In this special issue, Estella Wong’s paper reflects on the production and performance of an online live participatory auto-ethnotheatre amidst the first and the third waves of the COVID-19 outbreak in the city. Wong’s initiative came out of the need of “making connection in times of disconnection” she felt and shared as a member of the society living in state of desolation. Wong’s analysis finds that the video conferencing technology that has been mediating the creative playbuilding process through to its online performance has “an invaluable fluidity between ‘public’ and ‘private’ spaces ... not always easily achieved as in real physical venues.” Coupled with the use of webcams and the framing of audience participation, the participatory-audience could select to go into dialogue with their chosen performers using the Breakout Room and chat functions. The co-existence of actors and audience in “the overlapped performance space/private space and the ethnographically typical/particular spatial images of Hongkongers”, creating layers of meanings of social connections inside and outside this auto-ethnotheatre. The challenges remain are the absence of actors’ physical co-existence and somatic experiences for collective playbuilding on the online

platform, which to Wong could be the direction for further exploration.

Muriel Law's paper can be seen as a continuation of thinking the web-conferencing technology and its implications for drama education. Through the lens of applied drama, Law reflects on the delivery of an arts-informed sub-degree course about self-narrative conducted simultaneously online and face-to-face under the COVID-19. She analyzes students' aesthetic engagement in the arts workshop and other pedagogical encounters, and has found that students could be recast as "prosumers" who generate their self-narratives and learning experiences for self-reflections i.e. self-consumption per se. With such analysis, Law draws implications for applied drama educators: the need for the drama participants to master both the dramatic conventions and the digital media to facilitate their own dramatic explorations of the human conditions. She also prompts the question of the nature and the mode(s) of "presence" in technologically mediated learning environment.

Alongside the special issue is Mengyu Feng's case study of using process drama with primary school students in the realm of moral education in mainland China. Her study is an attempt to address the changing social relations resulting from rapid urbanization and rural-urban migration since its economic reform in the late-1970s. It suggests that the ensemble-based, playful drama pedagogy fills the gaps in the existing moral education curriculum that is rigid and didactic. Feng's paper illustrates well that moral values of trust and care are social practices resulting from a series of processes including negotiating the drama contract and mixed gender grouping, and embodied ensemble play within the fiction of the drama. This is what makes the drama pedagogical approach distinctive from the didactic and decontextualized moral education on offer.

The papers in this volume have added to the collection of applied drama/theatre practices that attempt to mend the fabric of our life weakened by the challenges of our times. The practices—in various forms like games, dramatic role plays, process drama and ethnotheatre—are social through and

through. Together, they reveal the practitioners' concern of the process of being human as well as the process of becoming, asking questions of who we are, and at the same time, who and what we wish to become as individuals and as social collectives.

At the time of writing this editorial, the fourth wave of the COVID-19 outbreak locally in Hong Kong was showing signs of dying down while variants of the virus were still looming in other parts of the world. We sincerely hope that the papers in this journal issue could show our care to those we concern, and stand in solidarity and mutual service as practitioners in the field of applied drama and theatre education.

References

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