Story, Play and Enchantment: 
The Importance of Drama for Children in the Early Years of Education

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Abstract

This article is based upon a keynote address I was invited to give at the “International Conference for Drama Education for Young Children” which took place at Nanjing Normal University in June, 2014. In addressing the theme of the conference – Drama, Dream and Children – I chose to refer to two practical examples. My intention was to provoke some thinking about specific ways that drama can contribute to children’s social, moral and language learning, not in any exhaustive way but by drawing attention to some important considerations. In particular I wished to focus on the kind of drama work young children enjoy and are capable of and the crucial role of pedagogy in enabling this to happen.

Keywords: early years, play, aesthetic pleasure, Shakespeare, pedagogy.

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There is a drama I enjoy doing with children of about six years of age based on *The Elves and the Shoemaker*. This tale by the Brothers Grimm tells of a poor shoemaker, now too old to make shoes quickly enough to earn enough money to live on. The elves secretly help him by finishing the shoes off each night after he has gone to bed. When the shoemaker finally discovers it is they who are helping him, in role as the shoemaker, I ask the children, in role as the elves, how they know which people need their help. Sometimes they tell me that they spy from inside mouse holes; sometimes they say they have a magic crystal ball; more frequently these days they have tablets and iPads and find out from social media networks such as Facebook. Then I show them a letter from a Mrs Gentle who is asking the elves if they can help her sick animals. They discuss this and act out little scenes showing how they cured a snake of bad toothache, for example, or extracted a nail from a horse’s hoof.

In the next session I introduce a new letter.

Dear Elves,

I am writing to you because I have heard that you help people with problems. I am the owner of a circus and I have some baby monkeys who refuse to perform tricks for me. I have tried hitting them with my stick and locking them in very small cages as punishment, with nothing to eat or drink for a whole day. They still refuse to do what I tell them to.

Please can you come here and make them do as they are told? But please do not come between 3 and 4 o’clock in the afternoon as that is when I have a short sleep.

Yours sincerely,

George McNasty
Circus owner

Children aren’t used to their teacher playing tricks on them. Often when I ask “Shall we help Mr McNasty then?” they will unthinkingly chant “Yeeeeeeees” until I ask “Really? Do we like what he is doing to the monkeys?” Sometimes, one or two children – usually boys – grin and shout out that they
would like to help Mr McNasty find a bigger stick. But when I introduce a little monkey in the form of a glove puppet, who can communicate with nods and shakes of the head, or by whispering silently in the teacher’s ear, then the atmosphere changes. They quickly want to know if he has escaped from the circus and what Mr McNasty is like. Soon all of them want to play a trick on this bully and help the other monkeys escape.

It doesn’t take long for children to realise that a good time to do this would be when Mr McNasty is sleeping. I then organise a version of the game called *The Keeper of the Keys*. The children sit in a circle in the centre of which is a chair. One child volunteers to be Mr McNasty, sits on the chair with a stick in her hand (in the form of a rolled up piece of sugar paper) and wears a blindfold to indicate that the room is dark. The keys to the monkey cage are placed on the floor in front of the chair. Can one of the children in the circle steal the keys without Mr McNasty hearing them? Can they escape back to the circle before he hits them with his stick? The game needs to be played quietly so that the intruder won’t be heard but there are shrieks of laughter if she is hit with the sugar paper or if she manages to steal the keys. Later the children talk to Mr McNasty (the teacher in role again). They explain to this stupid man why his treatment of the monkeys is unacceptable then draw up a set of rules which he must sign, stating that the monkeys will only return to work in his circus if he sticks to this agreement.

The design of this drama is simple as it is supposed to be suitable for teachers who are not used to using drama in the classroom and who fear its potential for disorder. It is tightly structured around a story and a game and is therefore easy to control. But teachers often need to be willing to adopt new behaviours if the drama is to work. Above all they need to embrace models of authority that may well be different from those they are used to.

Drama class cannot be successful if the teacher is too authoritarian, forcing children to do things and punishing them if they don’t. That is the kind of authority that Mr McNasty exercises over his monkeys and it is the fictional representation and punishment of such authority that makes this
drama so appealing to children. No, to understand the nature of the teacher’s authority here we need different, more humane, more subtle metaphors. In this and in all good dramas, I suggest, there are three models of authority that most children will readily and willingly respond to: that of the storyteller, that of the referee and that of the magician or “enchanter”\(^3\). The storyteller, as the teacher remains in charge of the story and makes sure it develops in an interesting way, even though the children contribute to it as it unfolds; the referee, as she makes sure the game of drama is framed and played according to a set of rules that allow children to enjoy it; and, the most difficult but perhaps the most important of all, the enchanter, as in this role she draws the children into an exciting, parallel world, creating and sustaining the illusion of an alternative reality in which they can play and imagine things differently, re-creating the world as they would like it to be.

The particular value for young children of the kind of drama work outlined above emanates from these three metaphors which point to our profound human need for stories, for embodied play and for dreams of wish fulfilment. These are not needs we grow out of as we age, far from it, but they are perhaps particularly acute in the lives of young children. Drama’s potential to nourish these particular needs is, I think, at the heart of its appeal for young children and central to its educational value.

The moral of this story as it is enacted through the drama is interesting. I find that children generally have few problems with it but that teachers sometimes do. There is a dark side to it; there is implied violence in the letter and some children, as we have seen, may initially be drawn towards siding with the powerful bully; after all, villains are often very attractive in drama. The particular moral force of drama does not reside in preaching or teaching moral rules, however. It impacts with immediacy on the senses and on the emotions. Hence the importance of the right visual symbols – in this case, the monkey puppet – to appeal to what Aristotle called children’s *orectic* potential – their inbuilt readiness to empathise with those who are suffering, to reach out to them with humanity\(^4\).
In this story we have a tyrant who needs to be taught a lesson and victims of his tyranny who deserve our help in securing their freedom. Children can readily identify with this situation as it is a monstrous parody of their own lives in school, where they must spend their days and always do what someone else tells them to. They also have a keen sense of what is fair and what is not fair, as every teacher and parent knows. So the moral imperative, once children are drawn emotionally into the story, is straightforward, giving them the chance to act upon the world – albeit a playful, alternative world – allowing them to become powerful agents, something they have little opportunity of being in their daily lives. How much fun it is to get the better of a nasty but in the end rather stupid adult! How much fun for them to be the teachers and for the adult to have to learn from them! This kind of wish fulfilment is often described metaphorically as “dreaming” in English. Dreaming, we are told – real dreaming, the kind we do when we are asleep – is vital for our mental health. The kind of dreaming we do through drama is different – a conscious, social endeavour, not a private, unconscious mental function. But, to follow the metaphor through, to describe drama as a social form of dreaming is to envisage it as vital for the social health of a community, including the kind of community we find in a class of young children. That is why the collaborative aspect of drama – learning and working together, as a group and alongside the teacher – is so important.

Like all of us, children have a need for aesthetic pleasure. Think of our lives without beauty. Would they be worth living? Why do tyrants – real life tyrants, those much scarier than Mr McNasty – imprison people alone in bare prison cells? Because they know instinctively – as we all do – that we suffer not only when we are deprived of company and of love but also when bereft of those pleasures we derive from nature and from the arts – from music, from the visual arts, from novels, from poetry, from the sensual rhythms of words and from the texture of beautiful language. The best early years teachers try hard to make their classrooms beautiful places and not just functional spaces for learning. The metaphor of teacher as prison warden is not one that any of us would aspire to. But drama has something special
to contribute here as it can bring a broad range of aesthetic pleasures into the lives of young children other than the visual and these emanate from its central dependence on language and story.

Let us consider stories first. It is too common, in my experience, for teachers of young children to prioritise the overly sentimental or the overtly moralistic in their choice of stories for young children. Stories in which Molly Mouse and Harry Hedgehog go for a picnic and are exceedingly polite to one another, even when they discover that one of them has forgotten to pack the jam, are not very exciting for children. Similarly, the story of a good fox who learned to become a vegetarian so he could be friendly with the chickens may be praiseworthy in its intentions but even very young children know enough of the world to find it pious and unbelievable. They know there is darkness in the world. The drama of *The Elves and the Shoemaker* includes rather than excludes this darkness. As in all the best fairy tales, however, the darkness is not gruesome and can be overcome, in this case, by a group of young children showing patience, cleverness and acting together.

When we use stories for drama, as Brecht well knew, we need to prioritise enjoyment over any moral lesson and this is as true for young children as it is for adults. Here the plot takes a surprising turn and requires them to make a choice. They have to decide who to help and who not to help. In order to do good they have to be cunning. They need to use trickery and skill in a game that can be genuinely exciting and that helps restore a moral order at its conclusion. Tricks, surprises, irony, tension, conflict are all part of a good story. If we are to use drama to help children’s moral development we have to make use of these elements. Pious objectives and good intentions are not enough. Drama is not church.

One of the great and widely acknowledged benefits of involving children in dramatic play is the opportunities it presents for language development. The fictional world of drama can stimulate a powerful fusion between play, imagination, speaking and listening, providing children with opportunities to speculate, wonder, question, explain ideas and negotiate.
meaning that few pedagogies can match. But drama can also provide opportunities for children to enjoy other aspects of language, its form as well as its meaning. By its form I mean its sounds, its rhythms, its musicality, the sensual qualities of language that we see children enjoy in nursery rhymes.

Let us turn briefly to nursery rhymes. Common across cultures, they prioritise form over meaning and often make use of physical gestures. Very young children soon learn to recognize this language and enjoy it for its use of gesture and sound rather than for its meaning. In fact the meanings in nursery rhymes are often highly ambiguous or obscure but they show us that children can have a high tolerance of such ambiguity. Here is one I enjoy when playing with my grand–daughter:

Dibble dibble dumpling, my son John, went to bed with his trousers on,
One shoe off and one shoe on, dibble dibble dumpling my son John.

Those of you wondering why your English vocabulary does not extend to include the phrase “dibble dibble” have no need to rush away in search of a dictionary! It is pure nonsense whose appeal lies in its sound and rhythm – that is what children enjoy and that is why they remember it. And that brings me, believe it or not, to Shakespeare.

My own university is very close to Stratford upon Avon, where Shakespeare was born and which is now home to the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC). I have recently been working with their education department in a research capacity and in one particular project they turned their attention to children as young as four and five years of age to see how well they might respond not only to one of Shakespeare’s stories but also to his language. The children they worked with were in an ordinary state school, one with quite high levels of social deprivation. About 30% of the class were recent arrivals in the country and had English as a Second Language. The RSC chose the play *The Tempest* and of course they adapted it and presented it to the children in a playful, interactive and physical form. Here is a summary of the play in the children’s own words which they wrote with only a little
help from their class teacher at the end of the project.

Once upon a time there was a duke called Prospero. He loved his daughter Miranda. He liked counting his money, too, but most of all he liked reading his magic books. Everybody loved Prospero. All the people clapped and cheered him.

Prospero had a brother called Antonio. Antonio was cross because he did all the work and Prospero read his books all day. Antonio went to a different country on his horse to see Alonso. They made a nasty plan. They waited until Prospero and Miranda were asleep and tied them up and put them on a boat! There were rough waves crashing.

The boat got to an island. There were snippy crabs, black and white cows, and a tree that looked like an umbrella on the island. There were snakes there too. There was a funny man living on the island. His mum was a blue–eyed hag. The man was called Caliban. He couldn’t speak. Every time Prospero went to stroke him he made a funny noise.

Prospero taught Caliban how to talk English. He taught him how to say apple, sun and cat. Prospero, Miranda and Caliban all slept in a big cave. Miranda and Caliban were good friends.

One night Caliban had a bad dream and he woke up. He was scared. He looked at Miranda and felt happy. He stroked Miranda’s hair. Miranda woke up. It was very dark in the cave and Miranda didn’t know who stroked her. She was scared and screamed! Prospero heard the screaming and woke up. He was cross because he thought Caliban was trying to hurt Miranda. Caliban tried to put a spell on Prospero but his magic didn’t have enough energy. Prospero put a curse on Caliban…

“This island is mine! Toads, beetles and bats light on you!”

Prospero made Caliban do everything he said. He had to wash the floor, count the money, sit down, go for a long walk.

One day, Prospero saw a boat on the sea. Antonio was on the boat.
“I am going to crash the boat just like you did to me”.

Prospero called the spirits of the air to help him. He made a magic potion and put it in the sea. The sea went black. The waves went up and down. Miranda watched. “Stop the storm!” The boat crashed on the island. The spirits played tricks on Antonio. Antonio was scared. The spirits took him to see Prospero. They had a long chat, said sorry and were friends again.

It is evident from this account of a complex plot that the children as a group absorbed the story and remembered it, enjoying the elements of trickery, jealousy, cruelty and reversals of fortune. Of course it is not as simple as a fairy tale but some elements they share in common – sibling rivalry, a princess deprived of her inheritance, a journey to an unknown land, magic, retribution. Those of you who know the play well will also recognize that there are specific elements in the above summary that have evidently come from the children’s own imaginative engagement – the snakes, cows and snippy crabs on the island; the various jobs that Caliban was forced to do. They have also remembered quotes from the play, the curse of Caliban and the fact that his mother is described as a “blue-eyed hag”\(^6\).

The strategies used to teach this work can be classified as:

- **Active storytelling.** Here children sat in a circle. The teacher narrated certain parts of the story, with a “story wand” and children were invited to enter the circle and spontaneously act it out;
- **Improvised dramatic play.** For example, when Prospero and Miranda landed on the island children explored it, imagining the classroom as the island. Later they made an image carpet, drawing pictures of what they had discovered there.
- **Interactive role play** with the teacher in role as Prospero and the children, at different times, taking on the roles of Miranda, the spirits of the air and Caliban.
- **Games and language play.** These were adapted from rhymes and children’s games to fit within the story.
• “Text scraps” of Shakespeare’s language, used throughout the process. These could be quite short or quite complex. Their rhythmic qualities were emphasised and they were uttered with gesture and physicality.

Data was gathered carefully and systematically from specifically targeted children whose use of language was monitored according to national assessment sheets. These included twelve general categories such as “Extends use of vocabulary/syntax” and “Engages verbally with ideas introduced”. Some more specific to this project were added, such as “Uses words/expressions drawn from Shakespeare” and “Interprets Shakespeare’s words either verbally or non-verbally”. Tracking sheets were used to assess the type and quality of language engagement demonstrated during the sessions and these were compared with previous assessments. The overall evidence was, in the end, striking, as children not only displayed great enthusiasm and interest but also demonstrated clear improvement across all of the categories specified on the tracking sheets. The more linguistically developed children demonstrated a broader range of language use than in previous observations, whilst other children showed jumps of up to twelve months in their developmental levels. Teachers at the school, in their comments, were not only impressed but often amazed at what they witnessed.

Videoed examples of this work demonstrated both how and why it impacted so much on the language of these young children. In one clip, for example, a young girl spoke to the researcher about her drawing of a fish that she had “seen” while exploring the island. This drawing issued from the world of the story but she related it in her talk to her own experience and understanding of this world. She spoke of the fish swimming through the warm, blue water to see its friends and recalled the warmth of the sea from a holiday she had had. This is valuable, communicative language, emerging from the girl’s imaginative engagement with the story and illustrative of how drama can relate directly to children’s own experience while, at the same time, extending it.

The teacher’s use of language matters as much as the children’s in
drama, as it is in this interplay that new language is learned. Another example illustrates this principle whilst also showing the teacher using the authority of both storyteller and enchanter. Children were in the storytelling circle while he narrated how Prospero and Miranda were on their boat, adrift in a stormy sea, when suddenly they realised that they were approaching an island. The children participated both vocally and physically in this telling, expressing the sounds and movements of the waves while the storyteller skilfully used vocal qualities – tone, volume, pace of delivery – to create atmosphere. From the intensity of the children’s expressions and the focus and direction of their eyes, it was clear that he was also performing the role of enchanter, conjuring up the island and making it appear in their imaginations.

I have made much in this article of children’s liking for rhythm and rhyme and how this appealing kind of language play can be worked into drama. The next example demonstrates this appeal in the form of a game, with the teacher exercising the third kind of authority, that of the referee. The game represented how Miranda taught English to Caliban. Here a child would volunteer to enter the circle as Caliban and would ask, rhythmically, “Caliban, Caliban, what do you see?” – the syllable in bold being where they would clap their hands and place the stress. Another child would reply with anything they recalled from the previous exercise in which they had created the island on their image carpet – “I see a fish”, for example, or “I see a crab” and so on. The teacher would ask for a physical gesture to accompany this and would then repeat what they had told him. “I see a fish, that’s what I see”, thus using the simple structure of rhythm and rhyme to turn this vocabulary exercise into an appealing language game.

Another interesting example occurred when children, in role as the spirits of the air, were helping Prospero make a spell so as to conjure up the storm. They were invited to read out what was required from an imaginary book of spells, fetch it and drop it into Prospero’s cauldron. The following observation is drawn directly from the researcher’s field notes. Jacey and Alice are pseudonyms for the two little girls and Miles is the name of the teacher:
Jacey has an idea for “carrots”. Miles asks: “just carrots?” Jacey adds, “mouldy carrots”. Miles extends her idea into a line that can be chanted: “Mouldy carrots they need no more.” Now Alice approaches and suggests “onions”. Miles asks, “What are they like, these onions?” She says “White and short”. Miles extends: “Mix in onions, white and short”. Alice goes to get the “onions” from an imaginary location on the island on the other side of the room. As she puts them in the cauldron, she clearly and exactly repeats the line: “Mix in onions, white and short.”

Again the teacher has acknowledged but also extended the children’s language by adding to it the kind of rhythmic pattern typical of formal ritual, and enunciated with suitable seriousness. Alice’s spontaneous repetition of the phrase is indicative of the formal appeal for young children of such language. It is not being forced upon her but she is being invited to play with it, the language of a magic spell which she is helping to create. The teacher is enchanter, indeed!

Turning our attention to how children were encouraged to make use of the actual language of Shakespeare, we once again encounter a combination of physical expression, gesture and collaborative play. In one example, children were invited to repeat after the teacher and loudly shout selected phrases that the sailors scream out in the opening scene of the play, when the ship carrying Prospero’s victims is caught up in the storm he creates. “A plague upon this howling”, they cried, “All lost! To prayers, to prayers! All lost!” and most enjoyable of all, it seems, “We split! We split! We split!” In the volume they generated, the excitement they demonstrated and in the natural way they embodied the language rather than simply echoing it – jumping up and down, waving their arms – it was clear that, although they might not have understood each word’s meaning, they appreciated well enough the communicative intention of each phrase as well as its expressive qualities.

On another occasion children were invited by the teacher to demonstrate what Caliban might look like. He called out “Make me a freckled whelp, hag born, not honoured with a human shape” – which is how Prospero insultingly
describes him. A young boy responded by crouching his back, twisting his hands and distorting his face into an ugly frown. Teachers and children reacted in delight to this, which he evidently enjoyed very much, as he turned in every direction to make sure that no-one in the room could fail to see him. To me this demonstrated two things: that it is quite natural and healthy for young children to want to be the centre of attention once in a while; and that they can readily tolerate ambiguity in language. By this I mean that they can self-evidently make sense of the expressive meaning of a phrase, and enjoy the way it sounds, without necessarily understanding each and every word.

One final example is interesting in the way it accommodates a certain mode of expressivity that is normally excluded from classrooms. Children were invited to play a version of the game *Grandmother’s Footsteps*, with all of them pretending to be Caliban trying to escape from the cave. The teacher was in role as Prospero. If he turned round and spotted any child moving, they had to return to the cave unless they could repeat Caliban’s curse to Prospero. The game therefore included an exchange of Shakespearean insults; “*Toads, beetles bats light on you!*” the children would call out, pointing aggressively in the teacher’s directions and taking great delight in such playful gesturing.

We don’t normally give very young children the room to play antagonistically in the classroom. We are too busy trying to socialise them into being nice to one another. But in terms of language learning there was something important going on here and it is rooted in the nature of drama and its cultural appeal. I turn to Naomi Wolfson to explain this. She has proposed that in contemporary societies, the bulk of our social and linguistic interactions occur in what she calls “‘the Bulge’, the day-to-day, unemotional transactional encounters of modern urban existence.” Here, she suggests, such public uses of language have to be relatively unemotive – and hence uninteresting – as they are being used to establish socially polite and distanced relationships. At each of the opposing ends of the bulge, however, she suggests that we find a different and far more interesting use of language – that of intimacy at one end and power and aggression at the other. Here
the relationship between the speakers is already established and language is therefore free to be used more creatively and playfully and is, as a result, of much greater human interest. It is these forms of language exchange – those of intimacy on the one hand and of power and aggression on the other – that do, of course, dominate in drama (Romeo and Juliet immediately springs to mind). Conversely, it is the staid, relatively uninteresting “public” language of the Bulge that will more often or not dominate in the daily interactions of the classroom. In early years settings, the language of intimacy, as well as the language of the Bulge, may well find a space in role play corners where home settings as well as public venues such as shops and restaurants can be set up for children to play in. The language of power and aggression, however, is obviously seen as far more problematic and teachers are likely to spend most of their time discouraging it. In these dramatic games, however, playful and tightly framed as they are, Shakespeare’s colourful and evocative language was able to enter the classroom safely and enjoyably and children relished it; and, as the research evidence indicated, the benefits to their language development appear to have been striking.

I do not conclude from this research that young children should all be studying Shakespeare but it does demonstrate their ability to work with and remember complex stories and to appreciate and understand difficult language when used playfully and when it has aesthetic and expressive qualities that they find appealing. It is not overstating matters, I believe, to conclude from such research that drama at its best nourishes young children culturally, emotionally and cognitively, enabling them to learn in a structured manner through stories, verbal play and physical activity, things they commonly enjoy. Drama can encourage children to work collaboratively and feel part of a group but also, very importantly, it can provide them with opportunities to be looked at individually – to become visible, be attended to, noticed and appreciated. In short, I would argue that good drama makes a space for young children to flourish as human beings.
Notes

1. I have written about this drama briefly before. See Winston (2004) where I also acknowledge the original idea of Miles Tandy. Miles is currently working with the RSC and is the teacher whose work I examine in the second part of this article.

2. A Chinese equivalent for this name might be Ma Wuliang 马無良.

3. These metaphors are derived from Guy Cook (2000).

4. For a fuller review of this idea, see Winston (1996).

5. I have invented neither of these examples, both of which I have observed in early years settings.

6. For a fuller theoretical analysis of this project see Winston (2013) and also Winston (2015). For a full description of the scheme of work for *The Tempest*, see Winston and Tandy (2012).


References


故事、戲劇和魔法：
戲劇於兒童早期教育的重要性

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摘要
本文依據本人於2014年6月應邀於南京師範大學《兒童戲劇教育國際大會2014》所發表的專題演講而寫成。該會議的主題為「戲劇，讓兒童享受夢想」，我選擇以兩個實例來探討該主題。我的意圖是激發各人思考戲劇於兒童的社交、德育以及語文學習的特定貢獻方式。文章並非在於闡舉方法，而是期望引發各人注意某些重要的考量。具體來說，我希望集中於兒童喜愛和能力所及的戲劇和能夠促使上述學習出現的某種關鍵角色的教學法。

關鍵詞：幼年，戲劇，美學的樂趣，莎士比亞，教育學

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