

Sketches from the High Country



Ableism: *Linden's Sister* by Marcia Johnson)

Teaching Drama Education in the Rockies British Columbia, Canada.

By Phil Duchene

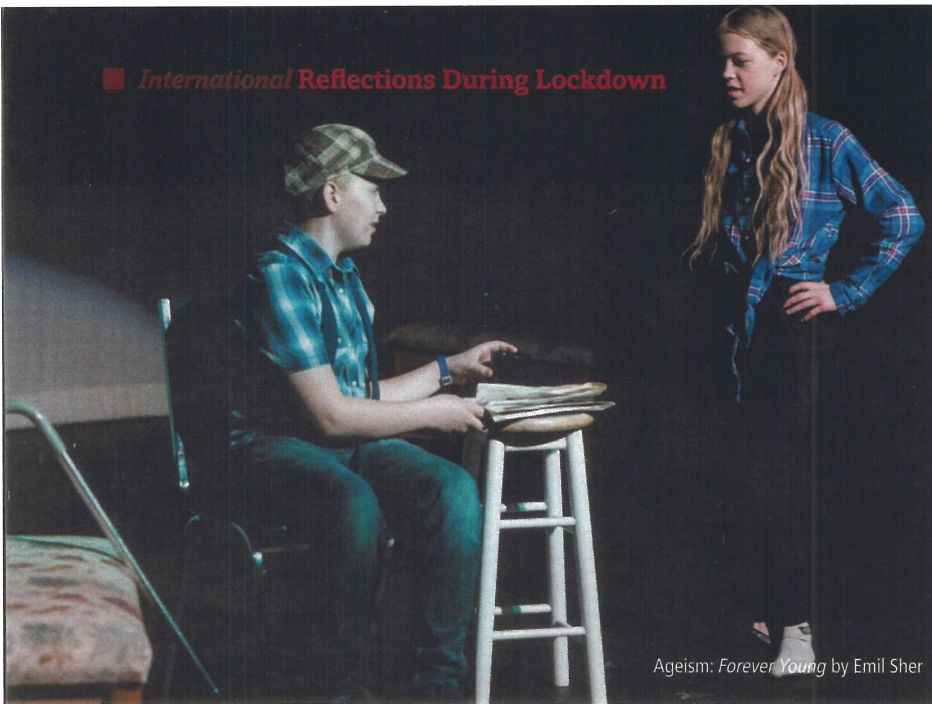
Just a week after our show in March 2020, the world shifted for us all. In British Columbia schools closed indefinitely and our universities ended face to face classes. We had talked about perceptions tilting throughout the course, and even used them as writing cues, thanks to Jonothan Neelands and Tony Goode's superb Drama structure 'Marking the Moment' - but not to describe the planet being knocked off its axis. This may read like some things are already gone but it is most important that those students who were a part of this keep all those feelings of connection, inner worlds and imagination alive. The physical closeness teaching Drama that we traditionally enjoyed over pure academics will be changed for the immediate future. Even if and when social distancing relaxes enough to see us in classrooms and studios again, likely casualties in my own work are shared mask, puppetry, costumes and props work, any group physicality like sculpting and metamorphosis and so on. As I said, that is assuming face to face instruction returns to teacher education classes and that post-secondary students may not opt for more on-line courses. And for what reasons? Cost? Safety? Ease of access? Even given an easily available vaccine in perhaps eighteen months, I am guessing that at least a larger proportion of all future Drama courses will be delivered on-line. The security aftershocks from 9/11 register every time you pass through an airport screening system.

So, the following piece was written about happier times to which I hope we may all return. I think again of LP Hartley's first line of *The Go-Between* (Drama 22.2)

The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.

But I never thought it might apply so quickly and profoundly to our work.

■ International Reflections During Lockdown



Ageism: *Forever Young* by Emil Sher



A last, first word: the line below was the original innocent commentary on young students entering the theatre for the first time with us in January 2020... who knew?

A whole new world, that's where we'll be.
Disney's *Aladdin* (1992)

Ah, it was the noise... everyone was so polite about the noise we made in Drama class in that very accommodating default way that most Canadians always seem to carry with them:

I'm sorry, but I think your car just ran over my foot.

Polite off the hockey rink, that is. Old joke: I went to a fight and a hockey game broke out. See, there can be a steely hand in the goalie glove. In fact, my fellow instructors were initially very good about it, until well, eventually, it got contentious. Picture a beautiful new community college so bright, spacious and clean and set right and tight above a small city in the Canadian Rockies. The college is full mostly of trades students with some very Western programmes such as a Haul Truck Driving School, featuring a cool simulator, and even Firearms Safety and Hunter Education courses. Nursing and Teacher Education, too. There were only classrooms to work in, though, full of desks and chairs, often with lightweight, less than soundproof partitions; no theatre, studio or multipurpose area. Instructors would say to me,

Could you keep it down, please?
or

We can hear you moving that furniture from down the hall,

and so on. I felt a little like Johnny Depp in the Captain Jack Sparrow

movie when he is insulted and berated for cheating (and winning) in swordplay by Orlando Bloom and answers lightly, 'Pirate...' Or in this case, 'Noise? It's Drama...'

I'm not sure exactly how much flak the patient and creative manager of the teacher education programme at the college actually took before she kindly asked me,

How would you like to teach your Drama courses in a 1910 heritage theatre?

Now, I had run museum theatre workshops in a one room schoolhouse at a nearby working ghost town, the designated heritage and beautifully maintained Fort Steele (see *Drama* 23.1) I so appreciated the magic and atmosphere that oozes out of these characterful, clapboard Victorian buildings and the unexpectedly bright, mountain light that flows in.

The Stage Door Theatre started life as a palladium masonic temple and is a happy rabbit warren of narrow, steep, even spiral staircases and sudden tour surprises;

Here's the Green Room; this is costume; there's the kitchen... Oh, you may have to go through the studio to get to the bathrooms - but we can put a curtain up across it.

At first sight it seems more like a wooden medieval castle than a theatre. The snug auditorium seats just 83. The building had been partially renovated last year and with a loving regard for period wallpaper, paint colour and wood millwork. 'New windows!' enthused a theatre society member, 'The old ones just filtered the cold air.' This is Canada, remember; when it is cold enough blood actually bounces on the ice, and where sled dogs run best at -20C.

The Community Theatre Board is incredibly accommodating. During part of our tenure we will even be allowed to work on a set that has been dressed for a suffragette show, *The Fighting Days*. They love the premise of our project: to bring in two new generations, teacher candidates and intermediate students to experience the magic of stagecraft through two classes: one of improvisation and theatre sports; and the other a social justice focused series of microplays from Toronto. I knew the money we would need to rent the space was a concern. The rental rates proved to be breath-taking - but in the nicest way; the equivalent of just sixty pounds a day... and, fortunately, the college stepped up.

I have chosen that we all enter the theatre together for the first time and take the tour from the manager. Ground zero. A levelling for us all. There are the usual strict community theatre rules that come from sharing and, of course, pointers about stage etiquette for sure - but we are here to create. For each course we have twelve classes of three hours, up to five of them with Elementary students with whom they would like to share their work.

As an aside, there is a history of performance, both in the arts and more usually sport, in gauging the worth of Education work here in Canada - and of teachers, too. How good was the elementary school Christmas concert? The high school musical? Did everyone get chances to share and shine at something? There are community markers right there for a teacher and a school. And as a First Nations Elder at a meet-the-teacher night once asked me,



More Than A Play cast acknowledging a fellow student

*I've only one question for you, teacher.
Is my granddaughter happy at school?*

I cannot recommend highly enough our social justice play texts, *More Than a Play* edited by David S. Craig. Each play is short and sharp - not unlike like the RSC micro-plays from *The Guardian* - but for kids. They are written by young Canadian playwrights and are obviously 'test-driven'. The plays are low vocabulary, high interest pieces that run about five to eight minutes and are aimed at nine to fourteen-year old students. Three of the plays have French translations, too. Look at what they tackle: homophobia, classism, values, racism, immigration, ageism, ableism, conflict and cyberbullying. And with insight, wit, real literary tools like magical realism, and drama structures such as forum theatre, conscience alley, and good old hot seating, and all led by a teacher-in-role model of process Drama instruction. All for under \$14CA. Larry Swartz from Toronto put us onto the text when he came to the University of Victoria BC to deliver a summer institute a few years ago. I know many of my now graduated students use it as a cornerstone in their Intermediate social studies programmes.

My fourteen third year undergrads' first job is to decide which of the nine plays in the anthology they'd like to lead. There are varying cast sizes and they will be working with nineteen grade six students (age eleven and twelve.) The first aim is to perform, in teaser parts, four or five plays. They will pitch them to the young students who then get to choose with whom and on what they would like to work. Choice is everything and remarkably quickly everyone is always accommodated,

including the ones who choose a production rather than a performance part.

Our young students come from two city schools; one might be designated Inner City in a bigger population and the other is an independent faith-based school. Not that it makes any difference when you are happily marooned together in a theatre. The college has a history of working with teachers from both schools. Our project teachers graduated through the college programme where I taught them and so share all those dramatic aims and conventions that are familiar to you, courtesy of Jonothan Neelands, Dorothy Heathcote, Carole Miller, Juliana Saxton, Cecily O'Neil, Carole Tarlington, Keith Johnstone and all the usual suspects.

A fast forward and a heads-up here... These are not notes on how to do an in-theatre Drama project. I am guessing many National Drama readers would think,

I have a theatre for my classes? Alright!

No, this is more an inkling of what it meant in their own words to be teacher candidates in such a formative experience in their training.

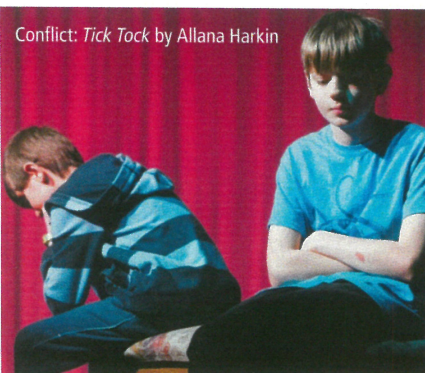
Marking the Moment was the tool I used to look in the rear-view mirror at the end of the project. In the words of authors, Jonothan Neelands and Tony Goode:

'Description: This convention is used as a reflective device to mark a position, place or moment where a feeling is aroused or an understanding of the issues occurs. As participants recollect that moment, they find physical form to represent involvement at that time...

Learning opportunities: Choosing and expressing their own moment of focus in the drama; finding form for personal feelings and thoughts; 'concretising' reflection and analysis through expression; encouraging sensitive awareness of work.' (Neelands and Goode 2015)

I expanded it a little for my students:

This prompt invites you to explore your many Drama education experiences in our classes. Choose a single moment when the work tilted with a particular relevance for you; perhaps with a personally meaningful topic, viewing or reading; perhaps through a teacher, peer or young student contact. In our Drama class you are asked to physicalise and freeze that moment. The class will have the opportunity to share those freezes and tap-in their inspiration with peers. This statue is your exact entrance to the paper. Your narrative will begin with a description of that freeze. For example, 'I am kneeling centre stage looking directly at a Grade 5 student who... etc.' Think of the writing as part of a professional conversation that invites your affective, emotional, rationale for the place of Drama in the curriculum. In other words, it will go from the very particular to the general to ask why Drama matters.'



Conflict: *Tick Tock* by Allana Harkin



Immigration: *The Suitcase* by Beatriz Pizzana

■ International Reflections During Lockdown

This is a favourite reflective tool in our department and allows every student to start a own learning, I take Robert M. Pirsis's (1974) 'stuckness' concept very seriously

Stuck. You're honked. Kaput. It's a miserable experience emotionally. You're losing time. You're incompetent. You don't know what you're doing. You should be ashamed of yourself... Someone, the good mechanic (or teacher) needs to show you a subliminal Quality cue (his capital) about where you ought to go.

And as an encouraging teacher I do like the old adage from Aristotle that

Once begun is half done...

The teacher candidates get to say the last words. Some were epiphanies written with the candour which can make me humble and a little jealous of the freshness of their new experiences. All came from the heart.

Jonie: (It's myself) a student teacher just about to work with kids on stage... Right now is the future, right now my dream is laying out and right now is my chance to seize the moment and put into practice the skills I have and work with them. So, I step forward, I reach and capture the light with my hand. I snap out of my daze that has been going on for the last four years and phase into my present future. I live in the moment and not in the future, or the past. I realize that I am here for 'such a time as this' and harness all my attention and focus into these boys, because this is what I was born to do.

Our plays had serious, social justice themes and it was a revelation

how challenging topics could be simply, even gracefully, explored by younger students.

Sam: Even though I had heard the play, Linden's Sister (read) before, the line struck a deep and resonating chord within me when spoken by a child on stage. 'It's not her fault. Her birth mother drank a lot of alcohol while she was pregnant and Jessie was born with fetal alcohol syndrome. That means her brain doesn't work the same way ours does.

I had been surprised by this clear and direct explanation when I first heard it read by an adult; and yet, I somehow felt doubly stunned when I heard it uttered by a child weeks later.

This brief moment in time resonates with me more than any other this term. The child actor spoke this line casually, yet with deep sincerity. The other children in the play reacted with mixed emotions. Though these responses were choreographed by the author, they felt very honest. One child responded sympathetically, the other quite aggressively. Disheartened, the first child gave them an out. 'I understand and you can leave if you want to. I just wanted you to know.' These young actors were not in my group, so I do not know how they reacted when first reading through their lines. I wonder how they felt inside as their characters were left with such an impactful moral dilemma. The 'right' answer was never given to them; they and the audience were left to make their own decisions. Whatever the reactions were, this play undoubtedly

left everyone with a deeper empathy and understanding of this disability that they will be able to carry forward with them in life.

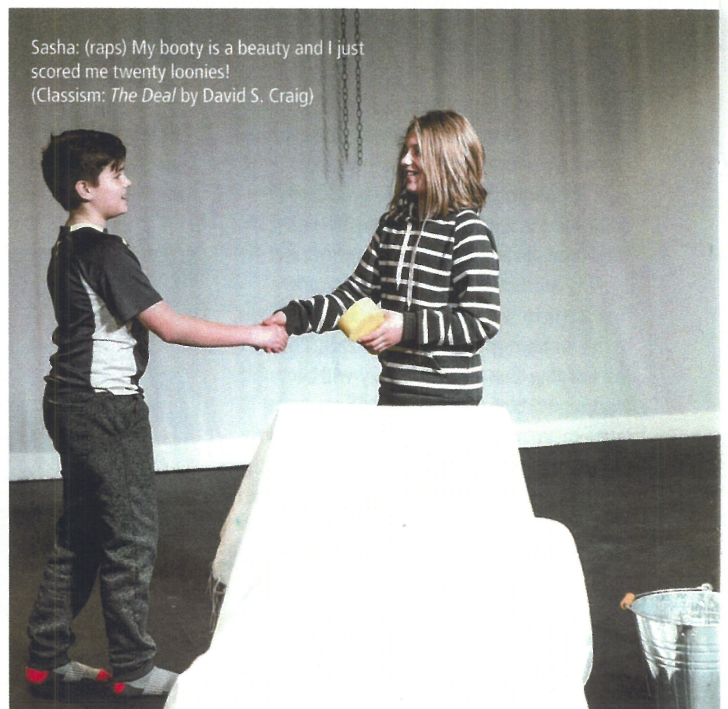
Kyla: My moment was when the whole show was over. There would be no more rehearsals of 'Forever Young', no more quick fixes, and no more high-fives, the show was over. Seeing all the students so proud of what they had accomplished and having their families there to support them was such a pivotal experience for me. Those students were not perfect; they forgot lines and they laughed on stage, but they tried their best. All three of our small actors left their hearts on that stage.

Marianne: I fell to my knees by the edge of the white lace fabric... a key piece of stage design in Linden's Sister, 'Dun-dun-dun!' I uttered, referencing the synchronized closing remark from the cast. It was at this point that Ashley, Kate, Simran and Brooke transitioned between their many efforts (in rehearsal) to complete the play and the chance to hear their success through an audience's cheer... (Our) moment also reminded me of the common ground that truly bridges the student-teacher relationship – youthful play. If I could spend every class bringing characters to life and practicing portrayals that match the impressions in my mind, I would. The four girls' interactions were so natural that I was not sure if I interacted with their characters' identities or their true selves.

Dorothy: We all organized our students into their groups, moved them smoothly from seat to seat as they shifted at the break between each play. Students were attentive, and the plays felt

Talk-back audience question: 'Did you ever have to wait outside the principal's office like that?'

Sasha: (raps) My booty is a beauty and I just scored me twenty loonies!
(Classism: *The Deal* by David S. Craig)





On the porch of our heritage theatre base, East Kootenay, British Columbia.



Ableism: *Linden's Sister* by Marcia Johnson

professional. The students seemed to lean in harder to the plays they were watching, and the ones they were in. To me, it seemed that Phil's eyes shone with the pride and contentment of seeing in us what he had been modeling all along. The look seemed to pass the baton in a sense. I felt that we had been holding back throughout our drama experience, not totally understanding or feeling confident in delivering content this way. In a moment, it seemed to click for us. We became the drama teachers we had been practicing to become. For me in that moment the students, the stage, the community, the content, all seemed to come together in one moment where I felt like, 'Ah, this is what drama is meant to be.'

Sandy: Look carefully and you can see things that aren't there...like the past.
Student 11: What does the past look like?
Sandy: Like me.
(Ageism: 'Forever Young' by Emil Sher)

Karin: Drama is student-led learning, it does not force students to fit in a box, it allows students to take all of their experiences, personality, and quirks and present it in a meaningful, inclusive environment. The growth the students showed in the short five sessions we had to work with them was immense. They showed vulnerability, acceptance, and best of all, they were proud of the work they did. Drama embodies every core competency in the BC curriculum. Drama enables students to find their place, their voice, and their confidence. It allows students to work together who may not usually do so and have an experience that bonds them. Drama is the most inclusive piece of the curriculum.

Karin directing *The Deal*.
I once shared that you embody a nicely-pitched cartoon style in your Drama teaching. And I think this may be an excellent go-to teaching persona for you. As Neil Simon says of his crazy drill Sergeant Toomey in 'Biloxi Blues', 'After he went to the Veteran's Hospital in Virginia the next day we never saw him again. Our new sergeant was sane, logical and a decent man. And after four weeks we realised how much we missed Sergeant Toomey...One should never underestimate the stimulus of eccentricity. (My teaching note) ■

The biggest things can always change, at any minute. This simple truth, both destabilising and liberating, is easy to forget. We're not watching a movie: we're writing one, together, until the end.
(Peter C. Baker, *The Guardian*, 31/3/20)

References

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