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AUTHOR Randall, Geoff
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ABSTRACT

The primitive elements from which drama evolved--group participation with no audience, a strong relationship between drama and other arts, and a sense of emotional release associated with physical expression--are also the bases for creative drama. Creative drama in the secondary school should (1) avoid a formal stage, the intrusion of an audience, or the unnecessary suppression of noise, (2) eliminate most scenery, costumes, and other technical aspects of drama, (3) involve all children in the drama, with hesitant ones gradually being drawn into the acting, (4) permit extensive freedom of movement and involvement, (5) encourage spontaneous speech, and (6) provide the teacher with extra knowledge about the child's character and emotional state. For a beginning class, introductory pantomime activities, such as crossing a creek on stones, can settle the class and encourage concentration. Next, short improvised plays based on stories or ideas can be acted. After a series of such lessons, the work can develop along a variety of lines--completely free form, improvisation within an assigned part, a partially scripted play, or literary study of drama. [Not available in hard copy due to marginal legibility of original document.] (LH)

Opinion

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Miss Alison Dolling
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Creative Drama: Origins and Use

By Geoff Randall
Lecturer in English and Dramatic Art, Teachers' College, Armidale, N.S.W.

[Much of the material in the early part of this article was originally written for presentation in the Armidale Teachers' College "Bulletin." It reappears here by permission of the editor of that journal.]

There has been some discussion in "Opinion" on the role and techniques of non-scripted drama in the secondary school. I particularly commend the article by Mr. Roger Marshman (May, 1967) and endorse his use of "dance" forms as an association of dramatic movement. There is a valid case for teachers of physical education, music and drama to plan a common course in the field of "movement as a lead into their respective studies in dance, gymnastics, rhythm, music interpretation, acting and dramatic studies.

I believe that a discussion on creative drama might benefit from a quick glance at some of the primitive elements from which both drama and dance evolved.

In primitive societies, art and acting were directly concerned with the business of life. Sympathetic magic and ritual, chant and rhythm were necessary features of tribal society. Some basic elements of dramatic activity in the pre-history of our society might be set out thus:

1. Performance was a community effort. Everybody participated to some degree. Leaders and specialist performers emerged but the communal essence remained.
2. There was not any audience in our meaning of the word. By participation and emotionally, all were caught up in the performance—be it magic rite, hunt-magic, ritual or celebration.
3. The motivation for or purpose of the performance often stimulated other art forms—dance, music, ritual, costume, make-up, poetry, painting, carving and sculpture.
4. A mystical element usually pervaded the whole dramatic process. In early societies there was a definite magical connotation, a belief that the performance could assist in organizing some significant event. As societies became more sophisticated the magical element disappeared, to be replaced by emotional release and physical expression.

Thus we have four basic elements—full participation, no audience, association with other arts, and a sense of emotional release associated with physical expression. These same four elements are the basis for creative drama. This form of what the syllabus calls nonscripted drama is not any new concept, it is the original form of drama. We are all familiar with attempts to produce formal, scripted drama with young schoolchildren. With much effort good results can be obtained, but in general the emphasis of all the preparatory work is not on acting at all, but on remembering the lines. With non-scripted drama the emphasis is on the acting from the beginning, and this is the part of dramatic work that holds the most value for children. We might recognize the following functions of creative drama:

1. It can provide opportunities for activities calling on the child's imagination and creative skills, leading eventually to a basis for artistic appreciation of movement and interpretation.
2. It enables children to experiment with movement and gain confidence in bodily techniques. There is a strong correlation here with creative

dance, and much of the movement study and terminology associated with creative dance can be used with drama. Both subjects depend upon basic movement.

3. In communal dramatic activity no pressure is put on individuals, enabling them to lose self-consciousness and to progress at their own rate.
4. It can, if used properly, enable children to adjust to life situations and improve their awareness of them by acting them out.
5. It can lead to a later stage in drama; the wish to share in the life of others, and later again to share with others, an audience, what they have felt, with confidence and skill.
6. It usually inhibits the activities of the exhibitionists and the bullies, and enables those with more subtle acting abilities to emerge and succeed. Too many classroom plays are dominated by the school clowns.
7. It provides opportunities for shared effort.
8. Skill in creative drama can lead to confidence in scripted or improvised drama with associated benefits in special skills such as design and colour, speech and gesture, and so on.
9. It can provide the opportunity to play out many of the more unpleasant aspects of current life—the TV villains, the film cowboys, the perpetual shooting and killing by the young boys.

With these general and specific functions in view we might now reconsider our four basic elements derived from primitive drama, and apply them to the school situation.

1. The use of a stage is undesirable. Stages inhibit movement and increase self-consciousness. In addition, stage work seems to bring out the worst, latent amateur-theatrical feelings in a teacher. As soon as children begin to move on a stage there is a strong tendency for 'production' along rigid and pre-conceived lines. For example, 'good performers' are brought to the front, poor ones drift to the rear corners. Any open, flat space is far, far more suitable.
2. There should not be any audience. It is difficult for many adults to overcome the belief that all drama is a spectacle to be watched, or that it should communicate, providing a means for a performer to convey some emotion or meaning to an audience. Creative drama is a means of self-expression. Any suggestion of an audience will produce some other reactions; inhibitions or 'showing-off'.
3. All children should share in the drama work. There need not be any role-playing or parts in the sense used by scripted drama. That can come later. In the early stages all of the actors play all of the parts as they think fit.
4. Shy and hesitant children can be gradually drawn in to the acting. There is no audience, no 'appreciation' or 'criticism' of their efforts.
5. A considerable degree of freedom should be allowed. This may come as a frightening thought to some teachers. It is true that a great degree of uncontrolled movement and associated noises would not be appreciated in some of our classroom situations. If this is a worry, find some remote area of playground for initial experiments with creative drama.
6. I have not made any mention of speech and dialogue. At the Junior Secondary school level pre-arranged speeches need to be drilled and rehearsed, to the detriment of spontaneity and acting skills. Let creative drama be a free form of mime. Let speech come if it will, if it

appears spontaneously. There is no need to prevent or prohibit it, but don't demand it.

7. There is little need for scenery, costumes or any other of the technical aspects of formal drama. Scenery would be a nuisance. Sometimes a variety of acting levels, a form or a rostrum, might assist, and they allow for a variation in movement patterns. Costume is a debatable asset. Children generally love dressing up, but I think that many forms of costume have the effect of inhibiting movement. Costuming might be left for other forms of drama. In the same way, properties would prove a nuisance and would be far better expressed in mime.
8. Noise, of movement and of musical or other form of inspiration, is inevitable, although the use of mime rather than improvised speech tends to quieten a lesson tremendously. With a little training the noises of feet on upper floors, for example, can be cut down. The fear of making a disturbing noise, other than that caused by lack of control over general behaviour, should not be a factor inhibiting a teacher's use of creative drama.
9. Creative drama can often provide a teacher with much extra knowledge of any child's character and emotional state.

We now have a considerable body of theory without any practical details of how it might be put into operation. It would be readily appreciated that any work of this nature has to be pitched at the age, interest and social levels of a class, and take account of the space available and the background experiences of the children. Thus some 2B boys may react strongly if it is suggested that they become fairies, while other, older boys might accept it. I am going to suggest a lesson pattern, emphasizing as I do so that there are many other ways of doing the same sort of thing. This pattern I have found useful with classes beginning creative drama work. In all sections the teacher should talk as little as possible, and should not join in too much. Despite all the advantages of enthusiasm gained from having teacher participation, in this sort of creative work it leads to mimicry of the teacher's actions by many children.

Introductory activities might be used, as a means of settling the class down and encouraging concentration. Some emphasis could be placed on the need to concentrate during this part of the lesson. These activities might be arranged to cover various basic movement patterns. For example, hand on arm action is studied in an exercise such as picking up a very full, very hot cup (and saucer) of tea. Trunk and arm exercises come from picking up and moving a heavy log or case. Foot and leg exercises might come from crossing a creek using shaky steeping stones. A general activity, at some length, would be to mix a cake, selecting and mixing in the ingredients at the teacher's suggestion. Imaginative children will show how they are holding a small object, say an egg, or large one such as a packet of flour, or a heavy one or an awkward one, etc. No postmortems, no specific praise is given. In the very early stages only does a teacher need to suggest the point to emphasize during the description of the exercise. For example: ". . . now pick up the packet of flour. Be careful, it is a large packet and fairly heavy . . ."

These introductory exercises need not take very long at all. They are followed by the main "plays." These are best kept fairly short. They may be stories told by the teacher, and retold for acting. Some noise or other stimulus may be used to promote topic suggestions or whole stories suggested, briefly, by the class as a whole. Narratives could be mixed with simple expressions of emotion, or a very free drama be stimulated by just single words or sounds.

For a teacher with control worries it is most advisable that every drama should end with a contrived episode that brings the action to a quiet close. " . . . then the tiger crept into the bushes to hide."

For classes restricted to a very limited space, even to the aisles of their classroom, actions involving little movement or movement-on-the-spot can be devised.

After a series of lessons of this type, later work can develop along a variety of lines. The freely creative work can continue, with more complex emotional and narrative work. An alternative would be to develop the creative work, with, however, the introduction of parts to be played. This can best be done in large classes by using a group drama technique, so that a class is divided into several groups, enabling each to develop its play at the same time as the others. There is a possibility for the work to develop into improvised-drama, with freely contrived dialogue created in the same manner as the action was in the earlier sequence of work.

In all of these approaches the emphasis is placed on the acting, and in such a way that all act, preferably together, so that the maximum benefit is gained from the limited time available. This approach should ideally continue from infants level into secondary work. In the early levels there is no need for scripted, produced plays at all, and in later primary and secondary work scripted work can be introduced alongside creative drama, rather than in place of it. Even literary studies of drama might be assisted by the use of a creative approach.

Any teacher who was able to see the production of 'Macbeth in Camera' will recall the episodes in which the actors freely improvised action and dialogue to improve their understanding of text and plot. This is a natural development from the creative approach which could be of great assistance to class understanding of almost any play. The 'story" of the play becomes the basis of the creative acting, and possibly improvised dialogue also. A group approach might well be used here, enabling different interpretations to appear, thus providing an excellent basis for discussion on the dramatic and literary qualities of the play being used as a stimulus.

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Select Bibliography

I have added this for those teachers who wish to follow up material on Creative Drama. There are many books available now, and I have taken the liberty of adding my personal annotations on most of the books.

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