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## Keynote: The Need for Drama – Creating the Human

### Abstract

The article put focus on the consequences of the changes in the British (and Nordic) educational systems, changing the focus from humanization to production of knowledge designed to serve the market, with the consequence of undermining learning of critical thinking and creativity through process drama.

### Keywords

*Drama; Boreale; Process drama; Drama for understanding; Humanization; Explore; Express; Exchange;*

In August 2015 I had the privilege of attending Drama Boreale in Silkeborg to give a keynote address and a workshop presentation. The Conference exhorted us to *Explore – Express – Exchange*. The title of the keynote (and this article) was *The Need for Drama: Creating the Human*. The title was an attempt to explore what I see as an urgent need to constantly address the function of drama in society in a time of an enormous crisis of culture, in a society at war with itself. I vividly recall – post the May General Election and funding cuts to Big Brum<sup>1</sup> – the keynote being infused with the anger I feel at what is happening to young people, education and drama and theatre education in the UK. At the time the emotion underlining my contribution seemed strangely at odds with the lakeside serenity of Silkeborg, that is until our hosts organised a tour of the Museum Jorn to explore the extraordinary working life of the artist Asger Jorn. I must say that there in the museum I was relieved to find myself, spiritually at least, in the company of someone who was as angry as I was. Jorn's work continues to rail against convention and conservatism today. It was a reminder that all the inequalities and injustices of our world are present, even in the most advantaged environments, in fact especially in the most advantaged environments; if only we are willing to be mindful and open to it. A great deal has happened in the world since August 2015, so rather than repeat here what I tried to say in the keynote back then, I will expand upon from the point of view of my experience today in the UK, to be mindful of the present moment, and hope it will be relevant to arts educators in the Nordic countries.

It was reported on the BBC on 20 January 2016 that Lancashire police questioned a 10-year-old boy at his home after he wrote that he lived in a 'Terrorist house'. The family claim he meant he lived in a »terraced house«. The Police and Crime Commissioner Clive Grunshaw complained it was not treated as a terror incident and that »*In the event there was no further action needed, but if the school and police had not acted then they would have been failing in their duty to respond to concerns*«. (BBC website) Grunshaw's objection does not take account of the fact that the child in question was asked to use his imagination to write a story and he was referring to a fictional character he had created called 'Cheeky Charlie'. You would be forgiven for asking why the teacher didn't stop to ask the child what he meant and that would have been an end to the matter. That, however, would be to ignore that the 2015 Counter Terrorism Act places a statutory duty on schools and colleges to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism. It is a natural consequence of the extension of the 'Prevent Duty' to schools. The BBC reports that in the year to the end of October 2015, 1,355 people aged under 18 were referred Channel, the de-radicalisation programme, compared with 466 in the previous 12 months.

This incident reflects the current ideologised narrative and the 'de-radicalisation' agenda is fostering an Islamophobia becoming deeply entrenched within the British State and the media. This narrative creates a fixed set of simplistic explanations, a ready-made 'other' that justifies the State's own actions, for complex problems relating to globalisation, foreign and domestic policy crises and a crisis of identity in British culture. The narrative saturates the press and our politics and goes hand in hand with repressive and authoritarian legislation and it has a disconcerting capacity to occupy the mind.

All the above takes place in a context whereby education is becoming increasingly selective. The 'freedom of choice' narrative justifies a process whereby the wealthy through 'free schools', faith schools, Grammar Schools, independent schools and of course the elitist private schools

get the best choice at the expense of the majority. Added to this, state education with its obsessive testing, globalised standardisation (through crude instruments like PISA<sup>2</sup>), and the de-professionalization of teaching serves up narrow curricula designed to serve the 'market'. These factors have two fundamentally regressive outcomes: Inequality becomes built into the infrastructure of society while the productisation of knowledge undermines critical thinking and creativity which can induce a state of mindlessness. This is how the dominant ideology is able to exert such a powerful influence upon us and makes us so susceptible to the narratives played out in the story about the 10 year-old Muslim school boy above.

By mindlessness I mean that we lose confidence in ourselves and begin to look for 'answers' in terms of the categories by which authority defines reality. A whole Mindfulness industry has grown out of the original research of Harvard professor of psychology Ellen J Langer<sup>3</sup>, but at the core of her work lies an analysis of routinized conformity and passive learning that denies the perceptions and promptings of our own minds, our individual selves. When we act mindlessly, we behave automatically and limit our capacity for creative response. Mired down in a numbing daily routine, we may virtually relinquish our capacity for independent thought and action. In my opinion this adequately characterizes the general state of education in the UK today. When we are mindful, on the other hand, her research shows that we avoid rigid, reflexive behavior in favor of a more intuitive response to life where we sensuously engage with the world around us and then act in accordance with our thoughts and feelings.

Mindlessness kills creativity, which as Jerome Bruner<sup>4</sup> defines it, is going beyond the information given. Rarely in our transmission model of education are children and young people given that opportunity. There are other psychological and emotional consequences too. Peter Gray in his book *Free to Learn*<sup>5</sup>, which focusses mainly on the impact of the decline of opportunities to play, identifies an increase in childhood mental disorders. and cites other research that indicates that empathy has been declining and narcissism increasing over the last 30 years.

And Drama? Drama has become increasingly marginalized in the curriculum. In the UK, where the work of Heathcote and Bolton amongst others inspired a world-wide drama in education (process drama) revolution, drama is disappearing from most schools. Supported by the syllabus, school drama focusses largely on developing performance skills. Form is separated from content and the art form of drama as a unity of form and content is being lost. It is also productized; we talk about serving the 'creative industries' but not about what it is to be human. There is a great deal of theatre effect in school halls but a decline in drama. A concentration on form often creates empty aestheticism where little of any depth or complexity is explored, expressed or exchanged. The separation between art and education is and always has been false, the relationship is symbiotic and as Gavin Bolton noted, art is pedagogical because it changes perception.

Another consequence of outcome driven productisation is that a lot of TIE, TYP<sup>6</sup> or Forum Theatre has become a blunt instrument for 'problem solving', where the 'right' answer or 'correct' viewpoint is barely concealed and the 'message' is relentlessly driven home – neither good aesthetics or pedagogy.

I believe that drama and theatre is human experience dramatized in order to create the self, as a social, historical, intellectual and emotional human being, in order to change the world. The most powerful drama doesn't deal with the issues of drugs, smoking, bullying,

self-harming, carrying knives etc. in isolation. These problems may be involved (you can't explore contemporary society without encountering them) but they are incidental to its main purpose: how to be a human being. This is not a problem that can be 'solved'. To deal with »issues« without also asking what it is to be human is a distortion: Values (or morals) is acquired only through the imagination. The imagination should not be viewed as reverie or fantasy. It is a specific form of human consciousness and therefore a form of reality. Drama is the imagination in action. When we reason imaginatively we have an emotional connection and we cannot be cold and detached because the self is engaged or dramatized. In drama imagination animates the 'other' it makes us socially engaged too. In this way we take personal responsibility because we feel it, the idea has a concrete felt connection to our own person and the decisions we make as a result are political. When we are working in this way there is no message, no right or wrong answer, young people and children use another's situation in order to learn how to be themselves.

And that is what drama does. It depends on our being able to enter other people's subjective selves. You have to put yourself (subjectively) not just in the other person's situation. You put yourself in their mind to know how they live in their situation. You have to enter their reality. Only our species can do that. Being human is always a cultural, shared, creation but while you can be well schooled, no one can teach you who you are, only you can do that. When we enter the situations and minds of others in a drama that engages us with the objective world, its joys and wonders and its crises and confusions, it brings that world »home« to the self and in turn we can feel at »home« in it. And everybody, whoever they are and whatever their situation needs to be at home in the world, it is the human imperative that creates the need for justice.

Since December 2014, I have been working on an international project called Facing the Gap involving partners from Hungary, China, Malta and the UK<sup>7</sup>. As part of the project I have been commissioned to write a play text, *Humana Fragmenta: Scenes of migration*. These scenes are a product of that process of meeting, exchange, meaning making and shared understanding. The participants in the project in the UK are mainly young people aged 18-24. The project has progressed as the global refugee crisis has unfolded, intuitively the work has gravitated towards an exploration of this. We began drama workshops on the text through drama workshops in January this year.

The UK Fragment is set in detention facility in Britain in the near future. Two paramilitary Immigration Security Officers (ISOs) from the 'Company' are observing 'illegals' from a desk through a two-way mirror. ISO1 is playing cards, »ISO2 appears through a door carrying two plastic pots of rehydrated noodles«. The illegals arrive before they have had chance to eat their food and ISO2 reacts to this with a flash of anger at the injustice of being denied a break, a meal that 'they' will be entitled to. ISO1 insists on completing the game of cards even when they enter the detention room. ISO2 is now distracted by the arrival of the illegals and not being able to eat his noodles and wants to know if there are any Asians among them, »Don't like the Asians«. He also expresses a sexual interest in one of the female illegals but the ISO instructs him to: »Keep your hands off. Company's cracking down on that kind of carry on after all the stuff in the papers«.

The first task was to build the room described in the text and then build a still image of the ISOs with ISO2 holding the noodles. One of the participants directed another as ISO2

concentrating on how he carries the pots of rehydrated noodles, explaining that he would hold them delicately with his finger-tips because they would burn his hands. The delicacy of his naked hands was a vulnerable contrast to the uniform – we saw the human in him.

Later the participants were invited to write on pieces of tape the resonances from their own experience that they could see reflected in the situation. By the end of the task the ISOs observing through the two-way mirror and the illegals in the room, the room and the furniture and the objects in it were plastered with tape. Notes like, on the pot of re-hydrated noodles, »*Frustration at having no time or reason to nourish your body. Eating shit = feeling shit = eating shit, and on, and on*«. Or on the Computer screen on the desk in front of the ISOs »*Systems over people*«. On the wall of the detention room »*The isolation room at Hill Crest*<sup>8</sup>«. On the pack of cards »*Too tired to move. Too bored to read*«. On the CCTV camera »*Constantly being watched, enforced decisions. Lack of agency in life*«. On one of the 'illegals' sat in a chair »*Waiting to see the head teacher for something u didn't do*«. On the hood of an illegal's hoodie »*Keeping your head down. Hoping to go unnoticed*«. On the suitcase an 'illegal' clutches to her torso »*Holding on to a part of you in a new place*«.

Even in this extreme situation the participants could locate their own lives, meet themselves on the 'stage'. They were articulating, on pieces of tape, a felt understanding. This is the job, the purpose, of drama in education. And, because such things concern the processes of social and human interaction, real understanding is itself a process: We cannot 'give' someone our understanding. Only if the understanding is felt can it be integrated into the mind. Resonance is the starting point of the process of integration. The resonance of something engages us powerfully; that is, affectively, emotionally and intellectually. But, significantly, it also engages us indirectly with that which it resonates. As Geoff Gillham once put it, »*Resonance is not authoritarian; yet it's an offer you cannot refuse!*«<sup>9</sup> The resonance with participants' lived experience meant they were talking about themselves but at the same time they were talking also about the wider world, the crisis of human culture we are living through. This made the situation and the people in the drama complex.

It has never been more important for us to know ourselves individually and socially, to be able to animate, recognize and empathize with the 'other'. Knowing who we are, however, is so complicated because we are so integrated into the ideology of the market place. In our culture everything, including people, has become a commodity. Our society knows the price of everything but understands the value of little else. To relate this for a moment to our current situation, the people fleeing the wars in Syria and Africa are embroiled in a life and death struggle which engenders so much suffering and cruelty. These wars are the logical result of so much inequality, corruption and the growing gulf between rich and poor that the all-powerful market creates. But the inequalities, that gulf between rich and poor, is destroying lives at home too. In the UK, the ideology of the political elites has perpetrated a great deception. This is what magicians call misdirection, directing the attention of a crowd elsewhere so as to distract from the trick happening right before our very eyes. Blame for the economic and social crisis is shifted from those that created it onto its victims; the poor, young, old and vulnerable, the workless, homeless and in this narrative those foreign 'others' – the migrant/refugees – take 'our' jobs.

To address the crisis that confronts our humanness we need to create the self. The mind seeks self-knowledge through the imagination which is the source of the human in us. Only

through self-knowledge and taking responsibility for ourselves can we become more social and take responsibility for others. Drama engages that human imperative for justice. For children and young people this engagement is crucially important if they are to become agents of change in their own lives and the lives of others. They need the space to see themselves and their situation on the stage – and by stage I use the broadest definition of the word. This is because the human imperative will become distorted and destructive or creative and more human. For the imagination, as Shakespeare wrote about the truth, ‘will out’. Drama is the creative use of the imagination.

To do this we need to see ourselves in every situation, and in doing so recognize the potential for creativity and destruction that is in all of us – we all have the potential to be ISOs. When we make drama we harness the creativity of the imagination and create an intellectual and emotional event *in us*. This in turn brings about felt understanding. We cannot sit idly in judgement on the ‘other’, or the foreign, or casually reassure ourselves that we would never act as the ISOs do in *Humana Fragmenta* or the teacher who passed the information on to the police about the 10-year-old boy (the ‘illegal’ threat in our midst), or even the police who interviewed him. In drama there is a dichotomy between self and ‘other’, we are confronted by the potential to be destructive that is in us all and our choice is whether to embrace that reality or deny it, to be more or less human in ourselves. Drama doesn’t make judgement for us, that is our responsibility – that is choosing how we shall live.

Felt understanding, is the foundation for empathy; our ability to step into the shoes of other. Not just figuratively but in the case of drama physically, enactively, and psychologically. Drama and theatre education has developed a methodology, facilitated by highly skilled professional artist educators for over 50 years, that unites form and content in order to do this powerfully and I fear that this rich heritage is in serious danger of disappearing from the lives of future generations along with an equality of opportunity.

The situation will be different in the Nordic countries, but I have no doubt that practitioners can learn from our experience in the UK. I am speaking not only of education and drama but the routine mindlessness that can blind us to what is happening before our very eyes, or tune our ears to false narratives, after all it was only on the 26 January that »*Danish lawmakers voted Tuesday to let police seize valuables worth more than C\$2,000 from asylum-seekers to help cover their housing and food costs while their cases were being processed. [The] government’s bill was adopted in an 81-27 vote, with the support of the opposition Social Democrats and the anti-immigration Danish People’s Party – Denmark’s two largest parties. One lawmaker abstained and 70 others were absent*«. (Jan M Olsen, Associated Press). We can all of us, even children, fall under suspicion under certain conditions and we are all capable of passively watching the lives of others through a sheet of glass.

## Notes

1. Big Brum is a Theatre-in-Education Company based in Birmingham since 1982. The Company continues to struggle to survive in the face of funding cuts to publicly funded arts organisations. In 2014 the Arts Council England cut the Company's revenue grant 100%. Cooper was Artistic Director for the Company between 1999 and 2015.
2. PISA – The Programme of International Student Assessment otherwise known as PISA organised every three years for 15 year olds throughout the world in Maths, Literacy and Science by the Organisation for Economic and Cooperative Development (OECD).
3. Ellen Langer – Professor of Psychology and author of Mindfulness, Da Capo Lifelong Books ISBN-10: 0738217999 – ISBN-13: 978-0738217994
4. Jerome Bruner is an American psychologist who has made major contributions to human cognitive psychology and cognitive learning theory in educational psychology.
5. Free to Learn – Peter Gray, Basic Books, 2014
6. TYP – Theatre for Young People
7. Facing the Gap – for more information about the project see [www.facingthegap.eu](http://www.facingthegap.eu)
8. Hillcrest – A midlands school which uses an isolation room for misbehaving pupils.
9. Geoff Gillham – director and playwright, and pioneer in the theory and practice of TIE, born January 27 1946; died June 15 2001.

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