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# STAGING DRAMA FROM A DIRECTOR'S POINT OF VIEW

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Drama is a genre involving a knowledge of practical stagecraft. Any successful scriptwriter, and this is basically what Shakespeare and all other literary dramatists were, must know what will be effective on stage. So, if we, as teachers, want to build up a knowledge and appreciation of drama in our students, we need to develop their ability to visualise and hear the impact of the text as if it were being presented on stage.

Many junior drama courses in countries other than Singapore, teach practical drama rather than drama as a literary genre, starting with improvisation, and leading through basic drama skills to devising and writing scripts for presentation in class, or full-scale performances on stage. This is an excellent way to build up the imaginative and technical understandings needed for interpretation of dramatic texts.

In this paper I shall outline a method of presenting a dramatic text so that students will utilise these sorts of imaginative and technical understandings, but which will also require a consideration of the traditional elements of plot, theme, character, and setting, which are necessary in order to interpret a play and transform it into visual and auditory images on stage. This sort of study provides a useful bridge to the academic studies required at O-level and A-level.

Dorothy Heathcote, an inspired teacher of drama as a learning tool, uses the phrase 'the mantle of the expert'. She is referring to the roles students take up as a way of learning about and exploring situations in the classroom, but it can also provide a rationale for asking students to assume the role of a director when they are studying a play. They are being given the responsibility of reading a text in order to exploit its possibilities for stage performance. They are required to come up with practical plans and blueprints for a stage production once their study and research into the text is complete. They are also being given a purpose for reading beyond the usual one of memorising key points about the text for examination purposes.

A second purpose in this paper, is to introduce a play which is not yet on the Singapore list of recommended texts, but which has proved very popular with British and New Zealand students in the Sec. 1/2 age group. This is a stage version of Longfellow's poem, *Hiawatha*, which has been adapted for the stage by Michael Bognadov, and which had a long and successful run at the National Theatre from 1978. The text has been published by Heinemann (1980). A further advantage is that a tape of the London production is available from the National Theatre Bookshop. (Multi-Media Tapes MMT LP104.)

*Hiawatha* has many attributes as a dramatic text, which would appeal to students and teachers alike. The richness of its themes, from Hiawatha's prophetic destiny, through to the tragedy of his mother, his miraculous physical prowess, his angry struggles with his father, his wooing of and wedding to Minnehaha, and the ultimate tragedy with the coming of the white man and the decimation of the tribes, all these have rich appeal and relevance to adolescents, yet the language is simple, and the play is able to be interpreted at many levels, according to the understanding of the pupils. It is also an easy and readable introduction to poetic drama. The metre flows naturally, and the imagery is vivid yet readily understandable.

The first step in the teaching sequence, is to introduce the play to the students, and familiarise them with the situations and themes and characters. If the tape is available, a playing of the opening chorus, and the first four pages of the text would set the atmosphere, and raise the key questions: Who was Hiawatha? What do you know about the American Indians, and their background and history? A brainstorming of students' existing knowledge, supplemented by asking student to produce a chart showing the information given in the Introduction (pp iii-iv) in diagrammatic or pictorial form, as well as some material from relevant library books, should give the class enough background to the play, so that they can start their first reading. Teachers should emphasize that a director needs to study the background to a play in detail, as a knowledge of customs and traditions is necessary for designing and directing a production.

A director also needs to make a summary of each scene after the first reading so that planning can take place based on the dramatic elements of the play. I suggest that teachers set a purpose for the reading (or listening), by asking students to note the following points for each scene:

- i. What is the atmosphere in the scene?
- ii. What is the dramatic purpose of the scene? i.e. What does the playwright want the audience to know or understand by the end of the scene?
- iii. What are the conflicts which develop in the course of the scene? (Students can be reminded that drama has been defined as conflict in action.)
- iv. Where do the climaxes come in each scene? (This helps students to become aware of dramatic structure.)

The next step in preparing a Director's assignment is to ask students, after the first reading is complete, to think about the play, and to choose a scene or incident from the play which they found particularly interesting, and which they would like to try out. It would, of course, be too demanding to prepare the whole play for production, since this often takes a director many months to do. The two acts of *Hiawatha* can be broken up into a series of scenes or incidents, such as those prefaced by headings – *Hiawatha's Childhood*, or *Hiawatha's Wooing*. It is best, for a first attempt, to limit the length of scene to 3-4 pages.

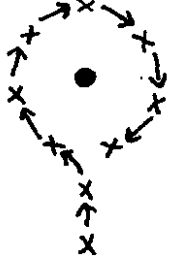
The assignment would consist of four sections:

- i. *Introduction.* Where the student-director introduces the scene chosen, and explains why it was chosen, and how it fits into the play as a whole. The material in the introduction would be used as the basis for a talk to the cast, if and when the scene goes into production.
- ii. *Casting.* A list of the characters in the scene with a brief description of each, as well as the sort of qualities the director would look for in actors chosen to play the part. Names of classmates whom the student believes would be suitable for the parts could also be included.

- iii. *Design.* Sketches or photocopies of costumes and properties, as well as a sketch of the set could be included in this section. Pupils should be warned to keep the costumes and sets very simple for a school or class performance. The ideas must be practical and inexpensive. For a class performance, just one article of clothing to suggest the character would be acceptable. The sketches do not need to be elaborate. They are just ideas for later development by the costume or scene designers.
- iv. *Director's Script.* This is the major part of the assignment. The student should photocopy the four pages of the script that are to be prepared, and paste each page onto one half of a sheet of plain A4. The other half of the sheet is divided into four columns, where the student is to note moves, interpretation, climaxes, and lighting/sound effects respectively (see below).

The teacher will need to model each of these types of planning, and give students guidelines and assistance in making their decisions.

### SAMPLE DIRECTOR'S SCRIPT FOR OPENING OF ACT ONE – HIAWATHA

TEXT	MOVES	INTERPRETATION	CLIMAXES	SOUND/LIGHTING
(Photocopied text pasted on page facing Director's notes)	<p>1. Company enters and Circle totem pole.</p>  <p>2. Stomp dance begins.</p>	<p>Storyteller speaks in a slow, formal style.</p>	<p>Build up to climax at end of speech.</p>	<p>1. Tom-toms offstage.</p> <p>2. Bring up lights on backdrop.</p> <p>3. Bring up spot on storyteller.</p> <p>4. Drum.</p>

## Some Suggested Guidelines

*Moves.* These are best sketched showing the shape of the acting space, with small crosses showing the position of the actors, and arrows indicating the direction of the moves. Students need to think of the grouping of the actors from the point of view of the audience, so that the actors form a picture indicating the situation at any given moment. The moves should be sketched opposite the relevant place in the text, so that the director or actors can see at a glance when the move should take place, and where.

The planned moves should not be regarded as absolute, or permanently fixed. If the director or the actor thinks of other ideas which may be better once rehearsal starts they should discuss and try alternatives, especially if the planned move appears awkward in practice.

Moves should be planned to focus and enhance the dramatic impact of the scene, and should never detract or distract from this.

*Interpretation.* In this column the director should note such things as pauses, tone of voice, loudness, emphasis, gesture, in fact anything which he regards as important in the interpretation of the lines.

Of course the interpretation will be built up during rehearsal in consultation with the actors, but key ideas can be noted beforehand.

*Climaxes.* These are very important, and the director can think about ways to enhance their effect through moves, grouping, pace, intensity, and of course lighting and sound cues.

*Effects.* These need to be kept simple, especially for a classroom performance, but it is amazing how effective simple sound effects, musical instruments, and even vocal effects can be, if used with imagination.

Of course the ultimate success of any planning comes during rehearsal and performance. It is not possible for all students to rehearse and perform their scenes. I suggest that the best four, or the first four students finished should be permitted to cast and rehearse their scenes. Only two rehearsals should be allowed for a classroom performance, since it would be too time consuming to take more teaching time. During rehearsal time, it is the role of the teacher to circulate, troubleshooting, and encouraging the student directors and cast to think of ways to solve difficulties. Generally I have found students get absorbed very quickly in their rehearsals, especially when it is made clear that time for rehearsals is very limited.

Finding space for rehearsal is also a difficulty. It may be possible to use an adjoining classroom, when the class is away doing P.E., or to use the audio-visual studio. In any case, the assistance and support of the H.O.D. English and the Principal is essential for any attempt to introduce practical drama into the curriculum, and the plans and logistics need to be fully considered.

The exercise of planning a production is a very valuable learning activity in itself, and need not necessarily lead to performance in every case, although of course the practical part of the exercise is very rewarding, especially if a sensitive and helpful evaluation and discussion is held after each presentation. The teacher should emphasize that the classroom presentation after two rehearsals, is really just another rehearsal, and the point of the exercise is for the audience to offer helpful suggestions for the next rehearsal. In fact, each member of the audience could be asked to make notes and suggestions about each of the scenes, and this could not only be shared orally with the director and cast, but be handed in as part of their own assignment to prove their understanding of the guidelines taught, and their ability to offer constructive ideas in drama. Another useful evaluation method is to get students to write self-evaluations, or else the teacher can rate the whole group for their teamwork.

This type of drama unit can be carried out with a short

extract from a play, or even a student written text. It is amazing how much work students will put into an exercise of this sort. Some will even learn their lines for homework, even though they have only had two rehearsals.

Of course the main requirements to run a course of this type are knowledge, experience and enthusiasm on the part of the teacher. It is not necessary to have qualifications in practical drama, but a basic understanding of stage terms, and the principles of stage production are necessary. Clive Scharenguivel of the Institute of Education has recently produced a booklet on this topic for Singapore schools, and there are many useful background texts in the Institute library, some of which are listed in the References to this article. Some local drama groups offer short courses or seminars from time to time for those who want to gain knowledge and experience in acting or stage production.

It only remains for me to wish those of you who would like to try this idea good luck, and to assure you it is a very rewarding though very demanding teaching method. For those of you who are diffident, let me urge you with a popular Kiwi slang expression — 'Have a go!' You will discover and develop a new range of creative teaching skills, while your students will have become aware that drama is more than words in a book.



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