

3. Big Brum Theatre in Education Company

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An introduction

"It is not our intellect or skills that make us human. We are made human by our imagination. Through the imagination we must create a three-fold map of past, present and future. We live on this map. Without it we pass our life lost in an unmapped "no body's" land."

- Edward Bond

"A child may absorb all the skills of a closed society and not have the ability to judge or question the values of that society. We may need other ways to open a child's mind to the deeper questions about society and human existence, not only to challenge the child but to get the child to challenge us and our culture. Perhaps there is something more important than the developing of cognitive skills, perhaps we can help even the youngest child to embark on a search for wisdom, the development of that child's own values and philosophy of life."

- *Teaching Children to Think*, Robert Fisher(1990)

Big Brum Theatre-in-Education Company, formed in 1982, seeks to provide the highest quality theatre-in-education programme for children and young people across all age ranges and abilities, in schools and further education, predominantly in the West Midlands. Occasionally the Company extends its remit nationally to schools, colleges, universities and theatres.

Every year the Company works with over 5,000 young people and since 1982 it has created 80 new theatre-in-education programmes.

As practitioners we proceed from the premise that children are not undeveloped adults but human beings in their own right with specific experiences that go to the heart of being human. Art is a mode of knowing the world in which we live, and the Company uses theatre and drama alongside young people to make meaning of their lives and the world around them. At the core of all our theatre and drama work lies an exploration of what it is to be human, the human imperative for justice, and the need to be at home in the world, which has been the age old subject of drama since the ancient Greeks. Theatre-in-education programmes are the lifeblood of Big Brum, and the Company is committed to building on them through the on-going development of core partnerships with schools, delivering extended activities into all areas of the curriculum, special projects, INSET and CPD.

Since 1995 Big Brum has developed a remarkable collaboration with Edward Bond, perhaps Britain's greatest living playwright. Bond has written nine plays for the Company that have since been performed all over the world.

While the Company is struggling to survive at this time of austerity, and a worryingly reductionist approach to the curriculum (which relegates the role of the arts in education to an 'add on'), it is also striving to artistically thrive. We can't do this in isolation of course, who can? But we are slowly and surely building an artistic and educational community around our TIE work and the collaboration with Edward Bond in schools and beyond. It is a community of dialogue and practice, which offers a constructive alternative to currently dominant but restricted visions about education's future (for more on this, see Appendices A and B).

Big Brum is committed to international partnership and its members have worked with young people, actors, teachers and theatres, universities and other institutions and organisations in over 20 countries. Each year the Company receives visitors from all over the world to see the work in schools with young people. This work includes building partnerships with our sister companies in Hungary and France, and other organisations such as the Qattan Foundation in Ramallah and Porta Studios in Greece. It is something we are very proud of and keen to nurture over the coming years. In November 2012, the Company welcomed 23 international artist educators to share in our Bond@50 celebration at Warwick Arts Centre. In 2015, we will be hosting further visits and events to mark 50 Years of TIE in this country.

Pedagogically, the work of the Company seeks to open up new ways of teaching and learning that go beyond the traditional transmission model - requiring the child be fed 'ready made' testable knowledge in order to pass tests. It is being made increasingly difficult for teachers in the UK to see the young developing human beings behind the target grade and assessment process. Increasingly restrictive and prescriptive curricula make it very difficult for them to access that young human being: that many still do, is a testament to their commitment to their pupils and to learning.

If one believes that poor performance in the education system is due primarily to failures in the assessment of teachers and students, then creating better instruments for measuring how well students are doing in literacy, numeracy and science makes perfect sense. But the culture of education is rooted in a different and far more serious set of problems. All the measured 'standards' in the world will not make our increasingly incoherent society come alive and grow - not alive simply to compete in the world's markets, but as a society worth living in and living with a better sense of where we are going and with deep convictions about what kind of people we want to be.

In its way, and in an appropriate manner, 'Touched' is about this problem: what we value in a culture where there is an omnipresent pressure to accept quick fixes and seek unquenchable, short lived gratification. These questions go to the heart of our economic

culture, but also our educational one, and above all inform a felt understanding of what it means to be a young person living in the world of 2013.

With all this in mind, we have included some analysis and a personal critical commentary on the 2014 National Curriculum as appendices to this Teachers' resource.

The pedagogical principles underlying our work have perhaps been best expressed by Jerome Bruner in his *Towards a Theory of Instruction* (1966). Bruner identified five educational ideals that our theatre-in-education work aspires to provide for young people:

- To give respect for and confidence in the powers of their own mind.
- To extend that respect and confidence to their power to think about the human condition, man's plight, and his social life.
- To provide a set of workable models that make it simpler to analyse the nature of the social world in which we live and the condition in which man finds himself.
- To impart a sense of respect for the capacities and humanity of man as a species.
- To leave the student with a sense of the unfinished business of man's evolution.

Jerome Bruner – *Towards a theory of Instruction* - Man a course of Study. (Harvard Press 1966)

The power of theatre and drama

We believe that drama is a dynamic and creative means by which to achieve the above:

- It is an holistic approach to the child that contextualises and grounds learning both socially and historically.
- In drama our engagement is both intellectual and emotional, making learning cognitive and affective. Drama and theatre cultivates the imagination, utilising our uniquely human capacity to imagine the real **and** envisage the possible. The former provides safety; the latter, freedom. This dialectic liberates the mind from the tyranny of the present. Drama and theatre is the imagination in action.
- Drama gives young people their individual and collective voice. There are no right or wrong answers to complex questions to do with how we live our lives/ understand the world. The world is an open, not a closed, question: it does not have a ready made answer. We are not concerned with telling young people what to think but teaching them how to; to engage young minds in learning to learn.
- Drama puts us on the stage and gives us responsibility for the dilemmas that the characters we meet face. This makes the audience and participants creative, and the decisions they take are an act of 'self creation'.

What is TIE?

Theatre-in-education (TIE) acquired the term because the work has been historically designed for professional theatre artists to take theatre into schools. TIE is a discrete art form that has evolved over the last 50 years, although in TIE the use of theatre as a tool for learning about the relationship between self and society has its roots in Greek drama which served the polis (citizenry, community) in order to understand itself. In our work there is no message, only meaning-making that tests our individual and social values.

Big Brum employs a permanent team of actor-teachers and we aspire to work with *one* class at a time wherever possible because a TIE programme is very participative, requiring the highest teacher to student ratio possible and it distinguishes TIE from any other form of theatre, including young people's theatre.

The task of TIE is to use theatre to explore the human condition and behaviour in order that it may be integrated into young people's minds and in doing so, make them be more human by allowing them to know themselves.

*"This is the job, the purpose, the domain of the arts in education. And, because such things concern concern the **processes** of **social** and human **interaction**, the domain, particularly of drama and theatre in education, real understanding is a process of coming to understand: we cannot 'give' someone our understanding. Real understanding is felt. Only if the understanding is felt can it be integrated into children's minds, or anyone's. Resonance is the starting point of the integration process. The resonance of something engages us powerfully; that is, affectively. But, significantly, it also engages us indirectly with that which it resonates. Resonance is not authoritarian; yet it's an offer you cannot refuse! (Gillham SCYPT Journal 1994).*

In theatre we do not encounter real life but reality imagined. TIE utilises this to draw young people into the fiction. This projects them into the situation, in this way the fictional context is subject to the child's control, they can engage with the absolute guts of the situation in safety. The most distinctive feature of TIE however is participation, young people can literally be drawn into the fiction by stepping onto the stage or by taking role. In all of our work the theatre or performance element is a part of a whole programme - there is often work before a performance, in between scenes and episodes and/or after.

The participatory element is sometimes integrated even further into the structure with a much more fluid boundary between the two different modes of audience and active participant, with rehearsed theatre moments shifting seamlessly in and out of spontaneous 'improvisation' or lived through interaction in the drama. Participation will sometimes relate to the use of a role and there is an always a central task, a purpose to it for the class. (For example, the play element of a programme which concerns the death of people in a village as a result of contaminated water. The children are in role as

investigators for the UN whose task is to produce a report which will bring those responsible for contaminating the water to account, and set up a more accountable and efficient means of water purification). The task is a way of encoding their learning. Being able to engage in this way enables the participant to bring their whole selves to the TIE programme, it matters to them, and they are not watching it but are *in* it. But by utilising the safety that fiction provides, as referred to above, the participants are protected *into* the world of the fiction. The physical manipulation of the TIE programme has all the characteristics of learning in real life.

The plays of Chris Cooper, like those of Edward Bond, also seek to place the whole 'self' in the site of the plays. In many ways the process is the same, and demands giving the situations over to the audience/participants. This is achieved by employing dramatic devices to get behind the ideology that constrains and determines both thought and action, and brings us imaginatively into the situation.

To reiterate a point made earlier, as practitioners we proceed from the premise that young people are not undeveloped adults but human beings in their own rights with specific experiences that go to the heart of being human. The implications of this impact on everything we do with young people.

No more so than in terms of how we assess material that is 'suitable for children'. It is our contention that in educational theatre and drama it is possible to tackle any subject matter with young people, not only those that they consciously see as directly affecting their lives but those that they may not be conscious of but are of critical importance to the future of our society, species, planet. It requires the choice of an appropriate form and the intervention and mediation of the Company to put all young people in their zone of proximal development and engage them in the 'crucible paradigm' (see below).

Vygotsky

One of the most important influences on the development of all Big Brum's work is that of psychologist Lev Vygotsky who was a pioneer of developing a theory of child development.

Vygotsky's insight into child's play has had an immense impact upon the development of drama and theatre-in-education. He recognised that in play children are dealing principally with the *meaning* (or concepts) of things.

"In fundamental, everyday situations a child's behaviour is the opposite of his behaviour in play. In play, action is subordinated to meaning, but in real life, of course, action dominates meaning."
(Vygotsky 1978)

The child creates an imaginary situation to explore a real one and from the point of view of development, creating imaginary situations can be understood as a means of developing abstract thought.

Another significant contribution to TIE methodology is Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD):

"The Zone of Proximal development defines those functions that have not yet matured but are in the process of maturation, functions that will mature tomorrow but are currently in an embryonic state. These functions could be termed the 'buds' or 'flowers' of development rather than the 'fruits' of development. The actual development level characterises mental development retrospectively, while the zone of proximal development characterises mental development prospectively." (Vygotsky 1978)

The implications of this approach for our practice as artist educators are enormous and have had a direct impact on shaping Big Brum's TIE programmes and workshops. Working in the imagination through drama the child stands a head taller than herself because she is capable of thought and action that is ahead of her actual development, through the mediation of the actor-teacher and her more capable peers. What a child can do with assistance today she will be able to do on her own tomorrow. In this approach the child is viewed as an active seeker of knowledge; the child and environment interact together enabling cognitive development in a culturally adaptive way; the mind is socially constructed; development occurs as a direct result of contact with the environment; language and thought develop independently, but eventually merge and interact.

Furthermore cultural experience is the most powerful tool for human beings to apprehend reality. Culture provides the scaffolding for understanding and it links concepts. To be truly inclusive, education needs to relate to this wider cultural context. Yet, much of the curriculum is divorced from experience, the most important means by which young people can test their understanding. Educational Theatre and Drama on the other hand is framed by its cultural context, it is culturally mediated, it resonates with our lives and makes use of new experiences to de-code them through the social values and shared habits of thought. It transforms our perception and understanding by challenging them.

The ‘crucible paradigm’ – ‘child as crucible’.

In all our work with young people we strive to use this pedagogical tool. Rather than function as transmitters of knowledge the actor-teachers act as mediator between the child/children and the fiction and the fiction mediates between the child/children and the world of experience. The actor-teachers and the young people co-operate in learning. It is what the great drama practitioner Dorothy Heathcote called the ‘crucible paradigm’ - the ‘child as crucible’, whereby students and teachers/more capable adults and peers stir knowledge around together so that we can create the meaning of the drama for ourselves. This not only transforms the relationship between teacher and student but it transforms the relationship between student and student. The ‘crucible paradigm’ demands that co-learners collaborate in a space where young people are taken seriously by adults and each other.

Further reading

We would like to draw your attention to two new books that say a great many pertinent things about TIE and this Company’s ways of working.

Davis, David with Chris Cooper (2013) *Imagining the Real - towards a new theory of drama in education*, Trentham Books

Jackson, Anthony and Vine, Chris (eds) (2013) *Learning through theatre – the changing face of Theatre in Education (3rd Edition)*, Routledge

Many other texts that have significantly informed our thinking and our practice, including ...

Bond, Edward (1996) Notes on the Imagination – in ‘Coffee’ by Edward Bond, Methuen

Bond, Edward (2000) The Hidden Plot: Notes on Theatre and the State, Methuen

Bolton, Gavin (2010), Gavin Bolton: Essential Writings, ed. David Davis, Trentham Books.

Bolton, Gavin (1998) Acting in Classroom Drama: a critical analysis, Trentham Books

Bruner, Jerome (1966) Towards a Theory of Instruction, Belknap/Harvard

Bruner, Jerome (1996) The Culture of Education, Harvard

Bakhurst David & Christine Sypnowich (eds) (1995) The Social Self, Sage Publications

Daniels, Harry (2001) Vygotsky and Pedagogy, RoutledgeFalmer

Davis, David (ed.) (2005) Edward Bond and the Dramatic Child, Trentham Books

Davis, David (2009) Introduction to ‘Saved’ by Edward Bond, Methuen Drama student’s edition

Elliott, Anthony (2008) Concepts of the Self, Polity Press

Fisher, Robert (1990) Teaching Children to Think, STP

Gillham, Geoff (1993) What is TiE?, SCYPT Journal [available through Big Brum]

Hawkes, David (2003) Ideology, Routledge

Johnson, Liz and Cecily O’Neill (eds) (1984) Collected Writings on Education and Drama – Dorothy Heathcote, Hutchison

Vygotsky, Lev S. (1978) Mind in Society – The Development of Higher Psychological Processes, Harvard University Press

Websites

www.bigbrum.org.uk

www.edwardbond.org

www.bondat50.org.uk