

**Where the action is—how drama contributes to the art of the teaching and learning of English.**

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*To set the stage*

What I want to explore here is the question of what drama contributes to the study of English as an arts subject in education, and my particular focus is on the practice of learning and teaching in English in secondary schools. Through this piece I want to try to clear a way through to get down to what I feel to be the most important issue—namely, to consider drama in English at the level of action, in the light of what actually happens in English classrooms. This is to emphasise that classrooms are populated and active places, where teachers bring their knowledge and skills of teaching to meet with students, who come with their own ideas, resources and a history of experience. At the same time, it is to hold a sense of drama as an active and corporeal mode of making meaning, located in history and place. Here I am drawing on work that I have done previously (1996 & 1997). Drama is always about social encounters; it is an immediate and tangible medium. As a reader of play-texts, or as spectator or actor, there is, in dramatic activity, an intersection between broad social and cultural concerns and moments of immediate experience, experience which is both personal and social. There is here a conception of drama as ordinary, as an everyday experience in contemporary culture. This is not something new, and by following this line I am drawing on the work of Raymond Williams (1977 & 1984) in the field of literary and cultural studies, and the work of those such as Garth Boomer (1988) and David Hornbrook (1989) when looking at drama and English in education. Before we get further into this, however, I need to find my way through some ‘noise’ which buzzes and crackles around the issue of how drama contributes to the practice of English as art.

When I say ‘noise’, I mean that immediate effect of the question is to conjure a babble of voices in my head, each with a different point of view on English, drama

and the arts, sometimes chiming in agreement, at other times contentious, defensive or belligerent. These voices represent the sets of discourses which surround the activities of teaching and learning, in which practice is situated. If I concentrate hard enough, the play of voices and views can turn into a play of people, each with their particular role to play. Let me give you a few examples. In one place, there are the curriculum-makers, those concerned with the drawing up of policy and documentation, whose authoritative voices have, for the last ten years or so, endorsed the view that plays, dramatic literature, are part of the literary heritage of English. Through this, as a notable example, it has come about that Shakespeare is the one 'author' whose works we are compelled to study in the English classroom. Alongside this, we are recommended (in italics) to study drama by other 'major playwrights', such as Marlowe, Priestley, Shaw and Sheridan (how these names were chosen as exemplars is another story) (*English in the National Curriculum*, 1995: 20).

Then I hear the voices of two senior inspectors for English, telling me that, especially since the revised 1995 National Curriculum came 'on stream', the status of drama has been strengthened and that it is now firmly placed in the core curriculum. As they speak, I hear echoes in the background of the plaintiff, sometimes angry voices of drama teachers (myself among them), who, when the National Curriculum was first devised, argued that drama needed its own space on the curriculum because it is sufficiently distinct and different from English, that it needs specialist teachers.

Then, at the level of the school, curriculum implementation and its organisation, there was the Head of English who, in trying to argue the case that all staff in her department had to teach drama as part of English, stated that there should be no difficulty with this because, after all, drama comes out of the literary tradition. Although I have always taught both drama and English, I expressed my own partisan view at the time to the effect that I thought that it was the other way round—more likely that literature emerged out of a dramatic tradition. Most recently, in

conversation with a Head of Drama in a London school, I was told that, as a drama specialist, she found it ‘interesting’ that one could qualify as a specialist teacher of *both* drama and English (I am currently involved as tutor on a PGCE course in English with drama). I took her implication as being that she viewed teachers of the combined subjects as being neither ‘fish nor fowl’ and, further, that it is right and proper that each subject should have its clearly delineated place on the timetable.

There are other figures who crowd the stage but who, so far, have had no speaking part in this rather rambling drama without a proper plot—they are, of course, the students. It is not that I can, or will, presume to speak for them, but it is in trying to see things from their points of view (and these will be many and various) that I want to address the question of the value that drama contributes to the study of English as an arts subject. I cannot, and do not want to, deal explicitly with here the storm of documents with bulleted lists and numbered paragraphs that pour out from the various Departments, Agencies, Offices and Units connected with education. I cannot make a hard and detailed argument here for drama on the curriculum that engages the authority, weight and (partisan) politics of official documentation, but I will hold thoughts of policy issues in the background and return to them at the end. Neither do I feel that I want to operate in the arena of what might be called personal politics of teaching in which I challenge, instruct or cajole teachers of English to teach drama, that they *should* or *must* teach it as part of their practice. On another side, I certainly do not want to downplay the importance of having, and continuing to have, specialist teachers of drama.

I want to try to look at things from the students’ points of view as the broad principle here. As things stand, we know that drama is a popular subject in its own right (recently the QCA’s survey of examination subjects shows that drama is the fastest growing examination subject apart from Business Studies) and, from evidence such as OFSTED inspection reports, drama activities are a popular and successful part of

English lessons. This leads me to ask, from the students' point of view, 'Can the study of English in schools do without the 'art' of drama?'. Whilst this invokes questions about the provenance of dramatic and literary traditions in the history of culture, of schooling and the emergence of the current curriculum, I will be avoiding the specific question of 'who begat who' (that is, whether the literary tradition emerged out of the dramatic tradition or *vice versa*), or where the proper boundaries of the subjects could or should be drawn. Instead I want to promote the broad view that the fields of English and drama are inextricably intertwined. It is clear to me that the layers of history constitute the ground and surface on which we, as teachers of English and/or drama, live and work. My focus in this exploration will be on what happens on the surface, on what happens between teachers and students in learning situations. Thus the 'ground for action' is, for me, set out in terms of what is salient and aesthetically powerful in contemporary culture for students and their teachers, and how the forms, processes and forces of contemporary culture articulate with the practices of schooling.

I want to continue by exploring these notions of the cultural salience and aesthetic power in the overlapping fields of drama and English in three stages. Firstly, after having stated what I won't be directly concerned with, I need to do some more work to mark out my argument in positive terms, I need to define, for example, what I mean by 'art' and the 'aesthetic' in relation to drama and English. I will try to connect notions of art with some ideas about 'culture', 'cultural salience' and 'everyday experience'. If this first stage is to mark out the conceptual boundaries of the argument, the second stage will be to anchor this to classroom activity through a description of an example of classroom practice, using this as a particular illustrative case-study. Finally, I will use this example to sketch out some ideas about what might be learnt *in the activity* and *through the process* of doing drama in the English classroom, and in the course of the activity, what might be learnt *about* drama as both text and performance.

### *The art of English and drama in culture*

In North America, the subjects of English and drama are combined under the category of 'language arts' and, although this is not the conventional label we use in the UK, we can see by the way that the curriculum is organised here that English and drama studies are, to some extent, brought together under this category. I say 'to some extent' because there are obviously plastic, kinetic and visual aspects of the mode of drama that go beyond the verbal. So what are the aspects of these related fields of study that we can call art? Clearly, there are many definitions of art and art-making are a complex and contended and it would not be appropriate here to burrow too deeply into this—many have written whole volumes on this subject. So, at the risk of making claims that are overly general or reductive, let me try out some limited attempts at defining what art is.

At the broadest level, art selects and shapes aspects of social life and individual experience and presents them, through various media and in many forms, for others' contemplation. Writing about the nature of art from a position that looks across different cultures, for example, the cultural anthropologist, Clifford Geertz states that art 'materialise[s] a way of experiencing, brings a particular cast of mind out into the world of objects' where people can look at it (1993: 99). The phrase 'cast of mind' is particularly interesting here in that it emphasises the active and formative nature of the arts in culture and, furthermore, in the use of the term 'mind', it promotes a view of art which is at once material, intellectual and affective. Geertz, like others (such as Ernst Fischer, 1963, or Walter Benjamin, 1970) have traced the emergence of art from the practice of magic in smaller-scale, mostly rural societies, through its use in the history of religion and, finally, to its secularisation and separation as a particular cultural field and activity in the 'modern' era, when it is defined by certain academic discourses.

If we turn to examine the term ‘aesthetic’ in relation to art, we find that the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the aesthetic in three separate, but connected ways: first, it is ‘of, or pertaining to, sensory perception’, that is, it is definitely corporeal and sensory, it may be sensual and it engages both intellect and emotion. Second, the aesthetic refers, through appreciation or criticism, to that which is taken as *beautiful*, and third, related very much to the second shade of meaning, it refers to matters of *taste* (1933: 148-9). Casting a glance through these definitions at the National Curriculum for English, we find how particular works by specific authors constitute the literary field of study. Poetry, prose and dramatic literature are valued, marked apart and selected according to the intellectual and emotional content of particular works, and by how beautiful and tasteful they are—teachers are exhorted to select works by ‘major playwrights’ and ‘major writers’ and these works must be of ‘high quality’ (*English in the National Curriculum*, 1995: 20). The process of selection is not arbitrary and it is not without its history. At the same time, teachers and writers on education have been concerned as to how this construction of the field of literature articulates with the cultural experience of many of our students (see, for example, Jones *et al*, 1992, or many of the contributions to the journal *Changing English*). This leads me to consider the nature of culture and, more specifically, how these ideas about ‘great literature’ relate to the concept of culture as it articulates with the everyday, lived experience of students and their teachers.

At the most general level, culture can be defined as the ‘style’ or ‘design’ of living, referring to that which is signifying, significant and meaningful in social activity and organisation. Art, then, is only one aspect of culture and cultural activity. The argument of Raymond Williams, and those who have followed him in the field of cultural studies, is that culture is ordinary. What we and our students value as affective and intellectual artefacts, or see as tasteful and beautiful, goes wider than the narrower definitions of ‘art’, or ‘art for art’s sake’, would allow. Yet as teachers,

we have to mediate, or induct, our students into the texts that the National Curriculum characterises as ‘valuable’, or ‘artistic’. In order to do this, we have to hold our students’ experience in our minds, ‘where they are coming from’, their values and understanding of culture, and move them towards an understanding of those cultural artefacts which are aesthetically valued (the works of Shakespeare, for instance) and legitimated in the wider order of things.

In his inaugural lecture as Professor of Drama at Cambridge, Williams made a strong argument for the ascendancy of the dramatic mode in contemporary culture—what he calls the ‘dramatized society’:

...drama, in quite new ways, is built into the rhythms of everyday life. On television alone it is normal for viewers—the substantial majority of the population—to see anything up to three hours of drama, of course drama of several different kinds, a day. And not just one day; almost every day. This is part of what I mean by a dramatized society. In earlier periods drama was important at a festival, in a season, or as a conscious journey to a theatre; from honouring Dionysus or Christ to taking in a show. What we have now is drama as habitual experience: more in a week, in many cases, than most human beings would previously have seen in a lifetime. (1974/83: 12)

Not only, then, is culture ordinary, but drama is ordinary and this is what I mean when I write about the ‘cultural salience’ of the dramatic mode. Later in the same essay, Williams writes about the reciprocity of drama and life, saying of drama that it is—

a way of speaking and listening, a specific rhythm of particular consciousness; in the end a form of unfinished, transient, anxious relationship, which is there on the stage or in the text but which is also, pervasively, a structure of feeling in a precise contemporary world, in a period of history which has that familiar and complex transience. (*op. cit.*: 21)

As those who make and populate the social and cultural landscape at the end of this century, all of us will recognise what is meant by the phrase ‘familiar and complex transience’. The term ‘structure of feeling’ is perhaps more opaque, but it is important for what I have to say here and strongly relates to the notion of ‘aesthetic power’ that I used earlier on. In Williams’s view, the habit in the formal appreciation, analysis and criticism of art has been to express things in the past tense,

but for him, and I would support this view, meaning is always made in that moment of engagement that people have with the work of art . We always have to hold onto notions of form and structure, but beyond this, engagement with art is invariably ‘with meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt’—it is in this meeting between the history and development of particular forms and structures on the one hand, and, on the other, the experience of art as actively present and immediate, that these ‘structures of feeling’ are generated (1977: 132). This sense of the immediacy of art, particularly in drama—its presence, its affect on our ways of feeling, viewing and acting in the world—is how I come to propose the view of drama as an aesthetically powerful mode of making meaning in contemporary culture.

Let me summarise this section, and before I move on to try and anchor it more firmly by looking at some classroom practice. I have been developing the outline of an argument about the learning of drama in English as art that has three interconnected strands. First, drama as art, text and performance selects, shapes, frames and actively materialises aspects of personal, social and cultural life. As a mode, through the action of socially organised bodies, in speech, gesture and movement, through space and over time, drama particularly reflects and refracts the ephemeral processes of everyday life. To use the metaphorical verb ‘refract’, is to draw in the second strand of argument about structures of feeling—that involvement in drama is to engage the personal with wider social concerns and interests. This is to make the argument that, as well as being *formed in* personal, social and cultural life, drama. like other modes of making meaning tends also to be *formative of* the personal, the social and the cultural. The third strand is that modes, structures and forms of drama, as text and performance, have particular histories (past, present and implied futures) out of which particular values have attached by different (and differentially powerful) social groups.

*Actors in the classroom*



In this section, I want to deal quite narrowly with the place of drama in English by concentrating on a single example of the way in which a dramatic text is treated as part of English GCSE. There are other arguments to be made about drama in English. There is, for example, a legitimate argument to be made about the usefulness of dramatic approaches when exploring other ‘literary’ and ‘non-literary’ modes (a hopelessly broad category including more ‘mundane’ texts, such as advertising copy, or personal letters, and so forth). Allow me to stick with drama as it is, and as it is likely to remain as part of the ‘diet’ of English. I could use an example from a lesson on Shakespeare, but I would rather it was something else. Attached to Shakespeare, there is too much dense complexity to wade through, too much cultural weight for me to deal with. What I want to present is an example of a fairly standard lesson with (from my own observation) a fairly standard classroom play-text, Arthur Miller’s *A View from the Bridge* (although I am never really sure whether it fits under the category of ‘drama by [a] major playwright’ or as a text from ‘another culture’ in the ‘Reading’ section of the National Curriculum for English).

I was going to be watching a lesson taught by a student teacher of English in a small boys’ school in north east London. They were approaching the end of a unit of work on the play and were preparing to write a piece for their course-work folders. The Head of English, the regular teacher of this class, told me that they were not easy to manage with some boys having ‘difficulties’ in learning or behaviour. The student-teacher’s own notes and observation notes by their regular teacher (who is also the Head of English) told me that, in the previous lessons, they had read the play, acted out parts, ‘hot-seated’ certain characters, watched a video of the play and an interview with Miller. In the interview, Miller talks of how he worked with the forms and conventions of Greek tragedy, replacing the ‘high-born’ hero with the character of Eddie Carbone, a working-class longshoreman, a marginalised and confused character, an immigrant to the US from Sicilian stock. I did watch the lesson, but the teacher had little to do during the course of it—the boys virtually ran it by

themselves. The lesson before, she had assigned roles to the boys—judge, lawyers for the defence and prosecution, Marco the defendant who had stabbed Eddie Carbone at the end of the play, other characters as witnesses, and the remainder of the class were to act the part of the jury. Then they had set about planning the trial of Marco Maggio in groups, after they had been talked through the order of proceedings for the trial.

In a narrow corridor at the end of break, I encountered the class, bubbling with excitement and pressing to get into the classroom. They were behaving like enthusiastic year sevens. I spot Yasser, a large boy, pocketing a small ‘teach-yourself law’ book as I push through to the door of the room with the teacher. The student-teacher asks Yasser whether he’s practised his summing-up speech and he answers by grinning and nodding his head emphatically—I find out later that he makes a very competent counsel for defence, even if he does lose the case in the end. As we jostle our way towards the door of the room, some boys (who I found out were to play the part of jurors) yell ‘Guilty!’ as we pass.

Four minutes into the lesson, after much hasty scraping and arranging of furniture, the boys have set up the ‘court-room’. The teacher tells them that they have prepared well and that this lesson will be part of their ‘oral’ assessment. The jury has to listen carefully and take notes so that they can make a good decision at the end. And then they’re off. The judge announces the case and Yasser stands up, tugging his lapels, addressing judge and jury in a dignified arc-like movement, like the swinging of a slow pendulum. “I’m not here,” he pronounces, “to plead that my client didn’t kill, but that he had no *intention* to kill...” Six pages of notes follow and I cannot give such a detailed account here, but I hope that in describing the opening of the lesson and by now giving a couple more indicative examples from ‘trial of Marco’ that you will have a flavour of the events.

The next episode that I want to describe in part is the performance of the boy that played the part of Beatrice, Eddie Carbone's wife and Marco's cousin in the play. 'Beatrice' is asked about an incident in the middle of the play when, provoked into anger, Eddie raises a chair over Marco's head.

"Was that threatening?" asks the counsel for defence (Yasser).

"He was just showing his strength," she comments and, sniffing, 'Beatrice' dabs at 'her' eyes.

The teacher, standing near the 'witness box', hands the boy a tissue.

"How can you say that? My own flesh and blood!" bursts out from 'Marco', sitting in the defendant's chair. The action proceeds fast and furious and the 'jury' takes frantic notes. I look for a hint of parody in the scene, watching the class for any ripple of giggles. There are none. Instead, the boys show a concentration and attention to the detail of the source text that it's hard to believe that they are such a 'difficult class'.

After more witnesses and questions, the two 'lawyers' make their summary speeches, Yasser waving his pocket-book about from time to time, adding emphasis and authority. Then the jury is asked to consider whether it has "been proved beyond a reasonable doubt that Marco Maggio *intended* to kill Eddie or not." I sit by the 'jury' table, watching and listening to the debate. The boys check through their notes and flick through copies of the play. They cannot be diverted by the voices of two of their number who argue the case for manslaughter. "He had a threatening look in his eye," says one 'juror', reading from his notes, "What did he mean by that?" As I look around, all members of the cast are now discussing the trial, consulting the play-texts and acting now as if they all were jurors. They collaborate on drawing up a list of reasons to support their verdict. This continues unchecked until the teacher intervenes after ten minutes, prompting the 'judge' to ask the jury whether it has reached its verdict. It has, guilty! All that remains is for the furniture to be restored to its regular position and the boys bubble out of the room, still discussing the case.

Next lesson, they will prepare a piece of course-work, analysing the action of the play.

*Learning in, through and about drama in English lessons*

Near the beginning of this article, I suggested that, in the making of, and responding to drama there takes place a meeting between the immediate and present, and wider social concerns and interests which have both a past and a future. The physical, spatial, temporal and experiential aspects of this dramatic experience, located in particular cultural circumstances (schooling, GCSE, the study of literature) and anchored in the exploration of a play by a 'major playwright', ensures that this is a complex process of mediation. It is, at the same time, both near to the self and far from it. The experience is transient, yet involvement and investment in this drama is high, with both intellect and emotion engaged. This is a layered drama—the original text of the play and the play that the boys make in constructing the trial of Marco Maggio. This gets near to the notion of involvement in drama as art as entering a 'structure of feeling' and are part of what I mean about learning *in* drama.

Another part of this notion of learning in dramatic activity is connected with the idea that involvement in art and art-making is both formed out of the resources that the boys have to make the drama—Miller's play, the repertory of 'speech genres' and 'performing genres' at their disposal, the discourses of everyday speech, law, textual study, argument and so forth. Through these forms of 'rehearsal', they are able to mobilise and consolidate resources of language, embodied and social action which can be drawn on in the future. In this complex interaction between teachers, peers and texts, the boys undoubtedly learnt things. If, in Shakespeare's words, 'imagination bodies forth the forms of things unknown' (Theseus, *Midsummer Night's Dream*, Vi) then in this lesson I saw imagination at work in the way that these boys literally 'bodied forth'. Clearly, through this kind of improvised drama, there is a leap away from the ostensible flatness of the printed text and a further leap in the

dramatic text that the boys made of imagination to set beside Miller's play. There is something in what the boys do that illustrates what Williams had to say about ways of speaking and listening and the 'specific rhythm of particular consciousness'. These rhythms are not confined to words alone, but have particular echoes in gestures such as the rhetorical tugging of lapels, or the arrangement of the setting of the courtroom, or the tears of the widow who is likely to see her cousin punished for the murder of her husband. Here there are many channels and resources used for making meaning.

Recently Kress wrote this of education and imagination—

[Imagination] is dependent on and is enhanced by the ability to engage in free movement among the forms of (internal) representation—not confined, for instance, to staying within language, or the visual, or the tactile, but to range freely across modes...

Imaginative activity takes place in any medium, though it is the case that society, perhaps particularly in formal education, in its focus on written language, acts to inhibit or suppress [the] activity of 'free ranging across' for most members of that society.. That does not apply to the Arts, but the very fact that they are treated as a quite separate domain indicates the extent of their separation. The different media make different kinds of imagination possible; and impose their limitations on imaginative activity. (1997: 108/9)

Perhaps the invitation to make the trial of Marco Maggio through drama was making kinds of imagination possible in which the verbal is only one part of a complex mode of making meaning in the era of this 'dramatized society'.

From this point the notion of learning through and learning about falls more easily into place. In thinking about learning through the medium of drama, I am making the point of how connections are made with areas that are beyond the immediate act. I have already begun to unpick a few of these connective threads. The strongest line is clearly thrown between the source text, *A View from the Bridge*, and the boys' improvised text of the trial. Here they 'body forth', populate their own text drawing from the characters that they have read, or have watched on video. And there is more than this in the boys' performance. Perhaps they take part of their cue from the 'chorus' of Miller's play, the lawyer Alfieri, but most of it comes from their experience of court and court-room procedure. It is possible that some have had direct experience of this, but it more likely that they are drawing on their viewing of

television, film and video trials. In Yasser's case, he draws from his 'authoritative' pocket handbook on 'how to be a lawyer' and this may be evidence of his personal aspirations. In engaging at some level with the discourse of the courtroom. Even the 'weaker' members of the class, who mostly made up the jury, felt motivated to take notes and take turns in discussion. It was, after all, their play, a play in which, at one and the same time, they were both actors and audience in their role of jurors.

The final aspect of learning, although it is integral with the other aspects of learning, is that which is concerned with drama as art in culture. In viewing the interview with Miller, they have been made aware of how the play was constructed, turning the form from its roots, presenting the downfall of the public figure of the classical hero, to the private and slightly pathetic figure of the working-class man. Here, in learning about how the play was generated and the context of its making, the connections are made with other texts and performances. These lines of connection with other texts stretch back to the classical origins of contemporary drama (I am not claiming, by the way, that these are the only sources for modern drama, or that the question of origin is not fraught with difficulty), and for the boys, they stretch across contemporary genres of courtroom drama. And more, it is clear that drama is not drama without its population of different and (in some way) living voices. The boys try out the nuances and rhythms of New York, working-class speech and patterns of behaviour. Again,

Raymond Williams has a useful thought here—

I learned something from analysing drama which seemed to me effective not only as a way of seeing certain aspects of society but as a way of getting through to some of the fundamental conventions which we group as society itself. These, in their turn, make some of the problems of drama quite newly active. It was by looking both ways, at a stage and a text, and at a society active, enacted in them, that I thought I saw the significance of the enclosed room—the room on the stage, with its new metaphor of the fourth wall lifted—as at once a dramatic and a social fact. (1973/84: 20)

I have been trying to follow a line of argument made up of a number of strands. I have been trying to see things at classroom level, and have used the example of this improvised trial both to generate ideas and to ground available theories in practice.

In classrooms teachers are mediators of a curriculum that too often takes little account of what students and teachers bring with them. The frameworks of the curriculum that are passed down do not, perhaps cannot conceptualise classrooms as populated places. I have tried to address this in looking for the significance of drama's role in English as an arts subject. I do not want, at any level, to deny that drama is important as literature, but it also has to be understood, perhaps pre-eminently, as performance. Yet, in performance, drama can become a volatile and unpredictable cultural event, subject to social forces of interpretation between performer and dramaturg, between the players and the audience. In classrooms, there are other institutional layers that contextualise the activity of drama. But it is always imbued with utterly present meaning, while, at the same time carrying its weight of history and tradition. Finally, like others before me, I have wanted to emphasise the power and prevalence of the dramatic mode in contemporary culture. Drama is ordinary and English shouldn't and couldn't do without it.

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