

Article 2

Factors Constraining Teacher Choices of Material for High School Actors: A Personal Reminiscence

Debra McLauchlan
(Canada)

Abstract

This personal narrative describes the author's early career experiences of directing high school theatre, with the aim of uncovering constraints affecting teacher choices of material for student actors. The story reveals that teachers' decisions are affected by six teacher roles and four persistent tensions within the context of the school environment.

Résumé

Cette narration personnelle décrit les expériences de début de carrière de l'auteur dans la direction de théâtre de lycée, avec pour but l'identification des contraintes affectant les choix par l'enseignant de matériel pour les acteurs étudiants. L'histoire révèle que les décisions des enseignants sont affectées par les rôles de six enseignants et par quatre tensions persistantes dans le contexte de l'environnement scolaire.

Resumen

Esta narrativa personal describe el comienzo de sus experiencias en la carrera del autor, dirigiendo teatro para el bachillerato, con el objetivo de descubrir las restricciones que afectaban la selección de material del profesor para los estudiantes de actuación. La obra muestra que las decisiones de los profesores se encuentran afectadas por seis papeles que desempeñan el docente y cuatro tensiones persistentes dentro del contexto del ambiente escolar.

Author's Biography

Debra McLauchlan teaches drama education at Brock University's Faculty of Education in Ontario, Canada. Before moving to the university setting, she taught high school drama and directed secondary students in numerous theatrical productions. She continues to pursue her interest in the high school drama classroom through research. With Laura McCammon, she co-edited *Universal Mosaic of Drama and Theatre: The IDEA 2004 Dialogues*.

dmclauch@brocku.ca

Biographie de l'auteur

Debra McLauchlan enseigne le théâtre à la Faculté d'éducation de Brock University dans l'Ontario, au Canada. Avant de rejoindre le monde universitaire, elle a enseigné le théâtre au lycée et dirigé des lycéens dans de nombreuses productions théâtrales. Elle continue à suivre son intérêt pour l'enseignement du théâtre au lycée par l'intermédiaire de la recherche. Elle a coédité, avec Laura McCammon, *Universal Mosaic of Drama and Theatre: The IDEA 2004 Dialogues*.

Biografía de la autora

Debra McLauchlan enseña drama educativo en la Facultad de Educación de la Universidad Brock en Ontario, Canadá. Antes de incorporarse al ambiente universitario, ella impartió clases de drama en el bachillerato y dirigió en numerosas producciones teatrales a estudiantes de secundaria. Ella continúa ejerciendo su interés en el drama dentro de las clases del bachillerato mediante la investigación. Con Laura McCammon, ella coeditó *Mosaico Universal de Drama y Teatro: Los Diálogos IDEA 2004*.

Factors Constraining Teacher Choices of Material for High School Actors: A Personal Reminiscence

Over almost fifteen years as a high school drama teacher, I directed or mentored more than 60 student productions across all genres, including numerous student-devised works. This article chronicles my earliest forays into theatre with teenagers, specifically three plays I directed in my first two years of teaching. My story reveals that high school teachers assume several roles in staging a play: educator, artist, producer, employee, colleague and representative of the school. Several dialectics are also constantly in force: career stage versus status and reputation; pedagogical versus artistic aims; institutional influences versus personal history; and self-confidence versus insecurity. Philosopher Gunnel Colnerud (2006: 371) believes that ‘conversing openly through self-examination’ is a critical requirement of ethical reflection. In that spirit, I offer myself as both an example and a means of highlighting factors that persistently affect secondary teachers’ choices of material for students to perform.

The setting is a small rural school in the Canadian province of Ontario, where farmers of white Eurocentric background either raised cattle or grew tobacco, girls often married right after high school graduation, and almost a quarter of the student body did not attend school until three weeks into the term when the harvest ended. My position was created when the principal learned that he must provide an art course of some sort on the curriculum, the arts being totally absent from the school’s offerings. Realising that music and visual arts require expensive supplies, he decided on drama as the thriftiest option and hired me to launch a program that included extra-curricular productions. Older staff regaled me about the school’s former theatrical glory, decades ago, when Gilbert and Sullivan was performed against cardboard sets to the musical accompaniment of ‘the lady who used to play organ at the United Church, but she’s dead now’.

Aside from myself as protagonist, and the school principal as primary antagonist, other characters in my story include students, colleagues, parents and local community members. Conflicts derive from incompatible assumptions, expectations, goals or objectives (neither interrogated nor even acknowledged at the time), between not only other characters and myself but also among competing facets of my self-identity. The story involves themes of power and accountability; contrasts of voice and silence, visibility and invisibility; and ultimately centres on issues of teacher ethics and morals.

People create meaning from the cultures in which they are immersed (Bruner, 1996: 58). For novice teachers, indoctrination into value systems that reify dominant discourses of knowledge begins in faculties of education, as well as in the schools and communities in which teachers are first employed. Neither teachers nor the spaces in which they work are ideologically neutral (Carklin, 2001: 9). While life in schools is flooded with values (Cabral, 2000: 20), every act of teaching and learning is saturated with the specificities of time and place (Grumet, 1998: 7). Because of the innate vulnerability of students *vis-à-vis* the inequities of their relationship with teachers, it is important to recognise that a teacher’s moral influence is constantly present, although often tacit, in the classroom (Colnerud, 2006: 373). For beginning drama teachers, notions of what counts as ‘good theatre’ have also been ingrained during undergraduate courses and productions. For Westerners, Eric Bentley’s (1947) assumption of 60 years ago still holds, I suspect, that: ‘All roads lead to Shakespeare ... When we say drama, we mean Shakespeare and

the rest.’ (1947: 107). And if not Shakespeare, then a host of others from the classical Western canon.

In terms of personal history, I entered teaching with an unwarranted sense of superiority over most other drama teachers. English majors in my pre-service institution could select drama as a required second teachable subject, provided they had studied three dramatic literature courses. I, on the other hand, had been trained as an actress. I thus self-identified as an artist/teacher and not as a teacher/artist. I had no intention of staging ‘high school plays’ with my students (despite their lack of performance experience whatsoever); rather, I would create ‘theatre’ using high school actors. Such brazen rashness and the incompatibility of my intentions with that particular setting are now astounding to me.

What Shall We Tell Caroline?

The first production I staged was performed at the annual Christmas concert for parents and siblings. Several push/pull factors contributed to my choice of play for the occasion. A definite ‘push’ was the desire to distance myself from the Gilbert and Sullivan stories I had heard in the staffroom. With no professional mentor in sight, I visited my former drama professor and perused his wall of scripts. There I found a one-act play, *What Shall We Tell Caroline?* (Mortimer, 1958), set in an English town and centred on a family’s bleak experiences with the meaninglessness of life. Quite suitable indeed for a family Christmas concert in rural Ontario! My professor wholeheartedly endorsed the script and suggested that I enter it into a regional competition later that winter.

Self-satisfied with what I considered a radical performance choice, I diligently set out to transform fifteen-year-old Canadian farm boys into gentrified British citizens. The school principal, never before involved in theatrical production, left me to my own devices — and no budget — in terms of sets, costumes and props. Rehearsals were held thrice weekly from early October until the big night in mid-December. Our performance would be the penultimate offering — Santa Claus being saved for the final treat.

On the appointed evening, a large crowd of parents, grandparents, and siblings applauded joyously for various traditional concert events — and then came the play. The students performed without one ounce of conviction or insight into their characters, but steadfast in their enforced memorisation of lines and blocking. Afterwards, I recall tentative applause from confused family members who weren’t really sure that the play was over. The principal’s reaction was shock — I had allowed a character to smoke a cigarette on the school stage. There would be no more of *that*, he admonished me.

Move ahead a few months to the drama competition where, beyond all reckoning, our production won two of the top prizes: best actor and best production. The principal met our success by comparing us with the other entries. ‘Boy oh boy,’ he said, ‘and I thought *our* play was weird!’ Then, as if by magic, the production earned both school and community respect. The woodshop teacher, who had ignored my pleas for help with the set, assigned a class project to create a display case for the trophies. The local newspaper, hitherto uninterested, published a glowing article about our achievement. Most importantly, the competition validated me in the eyes of students and colleagues. Whether they thought the play was weird or not — and that’s probably a kind word to describe their feelings about it — my choice had been rewarded by *those who know about such things*. I had met the power of competition as a normative feature of the landscape for high school drama teachers, and I felt a real antipathy to it.

The purpose of art is commonly alleged to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange. I relate the notion of strange — or foreign — to personal comfort levels. What we deem strange or foreign is whatever disturbs our assumptions, knowledge and expectations of an event. My choice of play was definitely foreign to both audience expectations and my students' lived realities. Yet, in staging it, I had tacitly suggested that the play's world was more valuable than theirs — as something appropriate to be laboured on by teenagers and witnessed by their families.

Did any good come from the experience? I suppose it was good that a previously unrecognised student with a weak sense of self-worth earned a best actor trophy. Did any harm ensue? Probably not in a lasting way. But I did expect students to reorganise their lives in order to attend rehearsals, and I did take them away from studying for December examinations. More importantly, I tacitly stated what counts as capital in the production of a play. And it wasn't the students. Although they spoke the lines, their voices remained silent; although they embodied the characters, their identities remained invisible. In accepting their roles, they unwittingly became my accomplices in illustrating on stage a set of beliefs that elevated foreign life experiences over their own.

Through my present lens of experience, I view this earliest directing attempt with self-forgiveness and humility. I recognise that my decisions, not only in play selection but also in how I went about preparing student actors, were driven by issues of expedience; by a focus on technical aspects of staging, voice projection, and timing; and finally by a desire to forge my own professional image. Self-interest led me to ignore ethical responsibility in selecting material that reflected my students' interests and abilities (Colnerud, 2006: 378). Today, I would approach the same play in an entirely different way than I did then, for the script did have things to say to teenagers if I had led them properly into its message. I didn't yet know that it is the way teachers construct learning events, more so than the content, that ensures a meaningful outcome for pupils (Carklin, 2001: 9).

The Odd Couple

Later that year, I was expected to produce a stand-alone play, not connected to another school event. The magnetic lure of a Christmas pageant would not automatically draw hosts of relatives and neighbours to the school in late spring, one of the busiest times of the year for farmers. And so I decided to make audience appeal a factor in selecting a play. Eventually I chose the American comedy *The Odd Couple* (Simon, 1966), based on three pragmatic criteria: there were actors who could play the parts; we could use the same furniture that we used for the Christmas play; and the story was already familiar as a popular television show.

Still rebounding from the smoking incident in *What Shall We Tell Caroline?*, the principal perused *The Odd Couple* for inappropriate language and behaviour. He firmly instructed me to replace all alcohol references with soft drinks; to eliminate all cigar smoking (but keep the remarks about the stench it made); and to delete all swearing. The resulting men's night out poker scene, pasteurised as it was, resembled a child's birthday party more than the male bonding ritual it was intended to portray.

The principal did not attend the performance, and I wasn't sure that he would pass comment on it when he saw me. On Monday morning, however, I was summoned into his office. A 90-year-old doyenne of the community had called to complain about a word in the play. Upon answering the telephone on stage, an actor had said, 'Oh Christ, it's my kid!' to his poker pals. This inadvertent use of the word 'Christ', written into the script but instructed to be purged from

performance, caused the principal to declare: ‘It’s very hard to build support in a community, but very easy to destroy it.’ He contemplated punishing the guilty student and warned me that I should be careful not to jeopardise my chances for permanent contract.

And then I did the only thing I am proud of about that production. I lied to my boss. Rather than expose the student to the principal’s anger, I took responsibility for the swearing violation by claiming to have overlooked it in sanitising the script. Humiliating as it was, the incident sparked an epiphany for me — the immediacy of my falsehood told me clearly where my allegiance lay: with the students and not the school administration. Through intimidation, I had tasted first hand that power is a major element in the life of teachers and pupils.

Sorry Wrong Number

My third attempt at directing was another Christmas concert insert. It was now my second year as a teacher, I was up for permanent contract and I wanted to keep my job. Trying to balance my obligations to the institution and my loyalty to the students, I recalled a radio play called *Sorry Wrong Number* (Fletcher, 1943). A one-act mystery, the plot centred on a man’s successful attempt to have his wife murdered. With a female lead who could play hysterics well, easy blocking and a minimal set, the play seemed a workable selection.

What I recall most about this production is the intensely ironic quality of reactions from school administration, colleagues and community members. The play was an unqualified success — my permanent contract guaranteed. Apparently murdering one’s wife is acceptable behaviour for teenagers to enact, while drinking, smoking and swearing are definite taboos.

In the cyclical ways that things sometimes play themselves out in life, I met a similar circumstance almost fifteen years later and hundreds of miles away, when my class of senior students performed collective creations for audiences of peers and parents. One rather sophisticated offering invoked a circus setting to explore various conflicts and turmoil. While the ringmaster plotted the murder of a rival, three despondent clowns discussed unfair labour relations. An irate parent complained about the clowns’ use of foul language — but no one decried the acts of robbery, assault and murder that occurred on stage. By that time, however, my professional status and reputation were well enough established to protect me from administrative retribution and humiliation.

Concluding Thoughts

So what does my story have to say about factors that drive teachers’ choices of material for their students to perform? My tale describes particular people in a Eurocentric rural community, and I have owned my shortcomings in maintaining the silence and invisibility of teenaged actors under my supervision. My experience also resonates with Neelands’ notion (2006: 26) that a dialectical relationship exists between a teacher’s subjective practice and objective school realities. In a sense, suggests Neelands, schools shape teachers as much as teachers shape schools.

Today I believe that, no matter where they teach, drama teachers are morally responsible for pondering basic questions of purpose: What do we hope to accomplish when we stage a school play? Are we aiming to attain a glossy professional production? Do we aspire to please parents, colleagues and/or school administrators? Are we focused on training students in performance skills? On developing our own artistry? On filling seats in an auditorium? On making money? Do we dare create theatre that challenges status quo understandings by interrogating issues close to the lived experiences of students? Or does our work marginalise teenagers in general? How much further still is our choice of material distanced from students

whose ethnicities, cultural and religious origins, or gender identities do not conform to dominant perspectives?

I don't, however, believe that simply allowing marginalised voices to speak accomplishes the goal of elevating their status. I agree with Michael Carlin (2001) that (a) the danger of portraying minority perspectives as 'exotic curiosities' is a real one (2001: 7), and (b) our choices should not categorise pupils into distinct groups, but rather recognise their uniqueness as individuals who belong to a number of groups (2001: 3). In many ways, play selection is not the end but the beginning of the process. Examples from literature (e.g. Cabral, 2000; Christie, 1996; Inman, 2001) tell us that it *is* possible to forge connections between numerous choices of material and the lives of our students *if* we begin by exploring common human interactions or themes.

My story began by identifying various roles and tensions that accompany a drama teacher's professional journey. Looking back on my career, I recognise that learning to navigate the challenges of these inherent factors leads us in the end to us making the best ethical choices we can in whatever school cultures we find ourselves. It is basically a question of ethics tempered by contextual factors. I conclude with the optimistic but challenging advice of Betty Jane Wagner (1998):

[Work in] drama calls for the same intelligence that it takes to conduct one's life, namely, to live with many possibilities and with ambiguity without losing the capacity to analyze a situation, make choices among alternatives that are often less than clear, act on these choices, and live with the consequences. (1998: 58)

References

- Bentley, E. (1947). *In search of theater*. New York: Random House.
- Bruner, J. (1996). *The culture of education*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Cabral, B. (2000). Rituals and ethics: Structuring participation in a theatrical mode. *Stage of the Art*, 12(1).
- Carlin, M. (2001). I'll show you mine, if you show me yours. *Drama Research*, 2.
- Christie, C. (1996). Arts and adventure in Papua New Guinea. *Australian Drama Education Magazine*, 2.
- Colnerud, G. (2006). Teacher ethics as a research problem: Syntheses achieved and new issues. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 12(3).
- Fletcher, L. (1943). *Sorry wrong number*. New York: CBS Suspense Radio.
- Grumet, M. (1998). Research conversations: Visible pedagogies/generous pedagogies. In J. Saxton and C. Miller (Eds). *The research of practice. The practice of research*. Brisbane: IDEA Publications.
- Inman, S. (2001). Multicultural drama in a Vancouver secondary school. *Stage of the Art*, 12(3).
- Mortimer, J. (1958). *What shall we tell Caroline?* London: Eleks.
- Neelands, J. (2006). Re-imagining the reflective practitioner: Towards a philosophy of critical praxis. In J. Ackroyd (Ed), *Research methodologies for drama education*. Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books.
- Simon, N. (1966). *The odd couple*. New York: Random House.
- Wagner, B.J. (1998). Drama as a way of knowing. In J. Saxton and C. Miller (eds), *The research of practice. The practice of research*. Brisbane, Australia: IDEA Publications.