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Ethical Tensions in Drama Teachers' Behaviour

Introduction

The conceptual framework for this paper is that *understanding mental images* is a vital component of the dynamic of process drama. Despite the emphasis on *instrumental* functions of drama and theatre in education particularly in the United Kingdom, it is the author's conviction (following others, such as Greene, 2000; Eisner, 2002; Bresler and Thompson, 2002; Uhrmacher and Matthews, 2004) that the core value of any arts teacher's work lies in their ability to create learning experiences that elicit *aesthetic modes of knowing*. These are based on the ability to experience aesthetic distance, which is itself to a certain extent based on the ability to generate rather than destroy mental images. Thus the study is positioned within a theoretical framework of understanding the ways in which mental images are created and the ways in which they function. Our theatrical modes of knowing are constructed on the basis of having ethical tactics of how to do the *things right* and not to rely only on a strategy of some common knowledge of how to do the *right things*. This notion builds on process drama, relating to Neelands' (1991) 'conventions' that enable to structure the drama work, and O'Toole's (1999) concept that 'Drama is a Charming Art'.

Constructing Mental Images

A 'mental image', as used throughout this paper, is a solid concept. It is a representation of an image, which emerges from a defined perception of an entity. A mental image is a holistic, highly integrated kind of knowledge and, as Perkins argues: 'It is any unified, overarching mental representation that helps us work with a topic or subject.' (1992: 80) Mental images help us understand topics in history, science or any other subject. Mental images, Perkins claims, are concerned with very basic entities such as the layout of one's home or the shape of a story. But they can also refer to very abstract and sophisticated matters. Drawing on Perkins' ideas, I argue that the concept 'mental image' is an impression formed by our experiences in life. It is based on strong and solid perception, whereas a stereotype, for example, could take information and place it in schemas that separate one event from another.

In order to get a more profound idea of what mental images are, and how they differ from what is just an image, let us try to imagine what might happen in a theatre performance if Medea did not kill her children one day or Don Quixote did not attack the windmills, just because they did not feel like it. The event would have been changed, but for most of the audience the *mental image* that they have of Medea or of Don Quixote would *not* have been damaged. On the contrary, it would have become stronger because the audience would have searched for the well-known image - or, at least, they would demand from the artist a good reason for the change: could it be a change in the type of the play? A parody perhaps? Could it be something else?

A closer look at the behaviour of Don Quixote shows that it is well rooted in the consciousness of the audience. The term 'quixotic' describes the concept of foolish and impractical behaviour, especially in the pursuit of ideals. Therefore, any attempt to change the mental image of Don Quixote is doomed to fail because quixotic has been adopted throughout the world, over time, to describe mainly those characteristics that are embedded in Cervantes' book. 'Don Quixote', taken literally, applies to no one, as Goodman argues, but taken figuratively, it applies to many of us. Moreover, there is the understanding that: 'Whether a person is a Don Quixote (i.e. quixotic) or a Don Juan is as genuine a question as whether a person is paranoid or schizophrenic.' (Goodman, 1978: 103)

Mental images serve as building blocks to any culture, and they should therefore be at the core of our educational theatre work. In our drama and theatre classes, we have to help construct mental images so that our students will realise that if Othello does not strangle Desdemona, it is a departure from the Shakespearian common understanding. In theatre, the thought is present and must communicate with the audience. In theatre we are in the sphere of *doing things*. Hence, as I already defined in another context, the theatrical *mode of knowing* is the embodiment of thought into actions. It is hermeneutic activity, and not a technical one (Schonmann, 2000, 2001). Hermeneutics is about creating meaning, not simply reporting it, and as Schleiermacher put it long ago, interpretation and understanding are creative acts, not just technical functions. (Schleiermacher, 1978/1819). It challenges us to inquire into what we mean when we use terms like 'mode of knowing', 'pedagogy' or 'theatre'.

In viewing a mental image as a vital component for building *theatrical modes of knowing*, we actually view it not as a state of possessing some information about something, but as the empowerment to carry

out certain rational elaborations with that knowing - it gives us something to reason with. It lets our mind make all sorts of rational elaborations such as: application, justification, comparison, contrast, contextualisation or generalisation. This line of thought, I believe, goes well with Greene's notion that: 'Works of art have a potential for evoking an intimation of a better order of things. I mean, of course, a consciousness of possibility.' (2001: 117) That is to say, there must be a conscious readiness in order to evoke the potential of an intimation of a better order of things through art. A mental image is an imaginative entity that helps to embody that kind of awareness.

The Dynamics of Process Drama

This understanding of how mental images are constructed and how they serve as building blocks of culture in general, and as building blocks in creating roles and characters specifically, we can now align with process drama. Cecily O'Neill claims that process drama is closely aligned with contemporary theatre practice in its approach to role:

Characters in process drama tend, by the nature of the activity, to be defined in the first stage of work by their roles as members of a particular group involved in a specific enterprise or circumstance according to the demands of the dramatic situation, for example as townspeople, journalists, celebrities, or advisers. This group orientation provides their initial perspective on the unfolding dramatic event and is likely to have a distancing effect. (1994: 37-39)

However, O'Neill argues that *individual identities* 'are necessarily more fluid and less predictable' (1994: 37-39). This fluidity permits the dynamics of process drama to evolve appropriately, as long as each of the participants can monitor their own engagement in the dramatic situation. In process drama, the character is built through improvisation, based on the possibilities that the dramatic encounter offers, as well as some aspects of the character that develop within the mind - like yeast in bread, as Muriel Bradbrook vividly suggests (in O'Neill, 1994: 91). Using the metaphor of yeast is actually saying that in process drama there is a dynamic process of growth that stems from mental images that serve as seeds planted in one's mind. In the process of discovery and invention, while building a role, these seeds maintain their power of growth - sometimes unpredictable growth, as I shall demonstrate below. Models for the process of structuring dramatic activity use conventions that 'can be seen as part of a dynamic process which enables students to make, explore and communicate meaning through theatre form' (Neelands, 1991: 3). All art uses conventions. Conventions can be a way of overcoming some of the given limitations of an art form, and they can dictate the nature of the theatrical performance (Mayne and Shuttleworth, 1986: 15). The question that interests me, and follows from this, concerns the extent to which working within known conventions can disguise the tensions and intentions of the participants in process drama, and the extent to which participants untie themselves from the conventions and use the 'charm of the dramatic event' for their own purposes (O'Toole, 1995: 82).

Methodological Note

To explore this question, I chose to examine an example from my personal practical experience. It took place while my teachers' training class from Haifa University was visiting a drama lesson in an elementary school. The class was part of a seminar aimed at constructing the students' identity as drama-theatre teachers.

My concern in this study is not with the teacher's moral responsibility of deciding *what* to teach and *how* to teach it, but with unpredictable emerging situations that occur in the class or in theatrical performance, even though the teacher has very carefully cultivated the what and the how. For the purpose of this study, classrooms were entered with certain questions in mind: What could be considered as a teacher's ethical behaviour in drama classes? How do we know that it is an ethical behaviour? What makes a claim an ethical claim? Since ethics is concerned with what kinds of actions are right or wrong, it was my intention to explore ethical tactics of how to do the *things right* when unpredictable situations begin to develop.

However, these ethical questions did not remain dominant throughout the sessions, because the situations experienced on site seemed to invade the intimacy of the pupils, and thus raised more fundamental ethical questions concerning the strengths and weaknesses of the use of process drama. One archetypal experience was chosen here for description and analysis according to twodefined postulates that are based on extensive writings, including Atkinson (2003), Eisner (2002), Greene (2000), MaCaslin (1999) and Winston (1998):

â€œ In the art of theatre, ethical considerations arise most clearly because of the proximity between life and theatre.

â€ The moral is inseparable from the artistic form.

The context of the experience was an incident that took place before the recent unrest in Israel. However, in the tense political situation throughout the last decade, education, politics and ethical issues have become inseparable.

A Case to Consider: *The Quarrel Scene*

I observed Lea's class at one elementary school. She told me that they were going to do their last rehearsal for a play they had been working on for the past six weeks. I thought to myself that things would go smoothly since it was the dress rehearsal, and it would probably be enjoyable. Everything ran smoothly until it came to the 'quarrel scene' - a scene in which two ten-year-olds, Mohammad (an Israeli Arab boy) and David (an Israeli Jewish boy) are playing football. The play, which was written by the children, contains a narrative of children having a fight over the ball, but after few minutes of quarrelling the situation has to be settled. At that point in the rehearsal, which was very carefully planned ahead, David continued beating Mohammad with all his strength as he might do in a real-life situation. He beat him and beat him and, for a moment, I was astonished. The beatings were so real, the tears were real. Was the crying for help real? What's going on there? Had I lost my ability to grasp aesthetic distance? Had they lost it? Should I stop them? What about their teacher? Why was she doing nothing? Was this a play that they were in? While all these thoughts were whirling through my mind, Lea entered the circle and tried to stop David, but could not. It was beyond her control. Another teacher and myself hurried to help, pulling David and Mohammad apart from each other by using physical force. Was it doing the *thingsright*? At that moment, we felt that nothing else could work, and the danger was real. We were confused and could not understand what had happened and why. After a short while, David, who was known as a non-violent pupil and a nice boy (that was actually the reason for choosing him to play this part in the 'quarrel scene' in the first place), told us with heavy breathing and endless tears that his brother was now lying in Afula Hospital, badly wounded. Yesterday at noon, he said, his brother 'was wounded by a Palestinian terrorist shooting' while walking along the street in Afula (a small town in the north of Israel).

David had calculated his revenge. He had waited until the rehearsal started, until the 'quarrel scene' was taking place, and then - overwhelmed by the mental image that he had of the Arab terrorist - he projected his anger, frustration and blame upon Mohammed and beat him really badly. David was not able to distinguish between the Arab terrorist from Jenin in the occupied territories, and between an Israeli Arab who is just as much an Israeli citizen as himself. He failed to do so because the mental image he had of the terrorist was stronger than any image he could have had of the Israeli Arab.

Here lies the ethical tension for the drama teacher. What should the teacher do? How will the teacher explain the incident to the class? What will the teacher do with David? With Mohammad? Would it be right for the teacher to take any stand? Would it be right for the teacher *not* to take a stand? How should the teacher explain the situation to the parents? What about the teacher's own feelings concerning the tense political situation? How could the teacher do *thingsright*? In order to know what to do and how, we should know what the consequences of our actions will probably be. But who has a clear idea of the consequences of our deeds (Strike and Soltis, 1985)? In fact, it is not only ambiguity concerning the *consequences* that creates tension for teachers, but also ambiguity of *intentions*. As Neelands argues, if intentions are too definite and clear, students are denied the power and experience of being artists. Neelands asserted that the power of the gestalt in learning opportunities 'requires extrapolation from detailed analysis of known character traits; provides opportunities for insight into the development of individual motivation, attitudes and values against the wider canvas of a variety of social interactions and perspectives' (1991: 55). And that is exactly what happened in the 'quarrel scene'. But, contrary to the 'usual' controlled developments that end with a happy ending, this time the extrapolation act provided the opportunity for the violent act to be executed. The complex context of the real life situation, and the mental image that emerged from it, served as live ammunition for David. He responded to the core situation of the drama in his own life and brought it into the process drama in class. So where could the 'Charm of Drama', in O'Toole's words, be found? O'Toole argues very convincingly that: 'Where you stand in the dramatic context depends on where you come from in the real.' (2001: 212). In the case that he describes, O'Toole concludes that: 'The students' behaviour exhibited that they felt liberated within the drama.' In the 'quarrel scene', the same process of liberation took place, but this time it meant the student had taken the liberty to use violence.

One might think that the teacher here is being regarded as an individual, isolated in the classroom, who must make a range of important decisions with no guidance from the school community. This would be a wrong impression. Issues of discipline, violence and ways of treating children who are quarrelling have a common, agreed policy. However, the situation described above is not the typical example of violent acts

because it was a case in which the 'as if' context prevented the adults considering the situation from taking it seriously. It took time to 'wake up' and see that it was not a play any more. The context of drama rehearsal makes the difference. I should add that this is a case that involved an appeal not only to reason, but also to an intuitive sense of the *right thing to do*. These intuitions can be used as a kind of data against which ethical theories are tested - in Strike and Soltis's question: 'What is the source of our ethical intuitions?' (1985: 31)

This analysis so far has highlighted difficult ethical questions in drama education. The Code of Ethics of the education profession adopted by the 1975 National Education Association (NEA) contains the following statements:

In fulfilment of the obligation to the student, the educator:

â€¢ shall make reasonable effort to protect the student from conditions harmful to learning or to health safety;

â€¢ shall not intentionally expose the student to embarrassment or disparagement. (Strike and Soltis, 1985: 23)

These guidelines raise the issue of providing students with a safe learning environment. The 'quarrel scene', in the light of the NEA Code of Ethics precepts, raises ethical problems in drama teaching that centre on the idea of providing a safe learning environment.

There are no rules for teachers' behaviour, and the ethical tensions are not specific to the drama teacher. We therefore have to be very alert to the potential of the high risks, especially in drama classes, because of the depth of the involvement that the activity requires from the participants and because of the nature of the dramatic action. Cecily O'Neill (1988), based on Beckerman (1970), argues that 'the drama teacher's task is not just to be able to manipulate activity, but to understand the nature, texture, and power of the action we set up for our pupils â€¢ What action can we find for our students which will cause something to happen?' (1988: 2). Here is my point: for too long we have been looking for ways to encourage the 'happening' in our classes. The great paradoxical idea of 'We escape from reality (in our drama activity) in order to participate more fully in it' (O'Neill, 1988: 7) is sometimes too dangerous, not only in the political context but in the psychological and social contexts as well.

One way to reduce the risk-taking is to focus on the phase *before* the 'something happening' by working with mental images as a tool for examining the potential tension between the given situation and the complete action. Sometimes drama teachers fail to understand the importance of clarifying mental images, and this failure could be one of the causes of ethical problems in drama and theatre educational work. Truth on stage is not about imitating real life, but about representing it in a symbolic way. A clear line must be drawn between mere imitation of life and representing life. Working with mental images is one of the ways to struggle with the sources of violence and racism and prejudice by drawing lines between life and art. As Solier (2001) claims, the demons of violence are embedded in the psyche of our troubled society; it is therefore mistaken to believe that the encounter between Arabs and Jews, as we saw in the context of creating a dramatic scene - that is, the 'quarrel scene' - will improve personal relations and political understanding.

After interviewing Lea, the drama teacher, about the preparations for the show, after interviewing the kids in the class and having their understanding of what had happened, after speaking with Mohammad and David and their psychologist (they both needed therapeutic treatment, which lasted quite a few months), I came to the understanding that the 'mantra' we are all using - that 'playing drama is a safe thing to do, that being in a theatre class is being in an area akin to life yet without any real danger' - is false. For a long time, we have been asleep while on guard; we (theatre and drama teachers and researchers) have raised few doubts. We have not investigated adequately that mantra which unfortunately tends to be very problematic exactly because of the proximity between life and theatre. The very idea that proximity to life is a safe zone to play in turns to be a dangerous and conflicting one. From a performance of a fictitious situation in which an imaginary danger existed, it turned into a real and frightening danger.

Examination of a crucial encounter in drama-theatre education between ethics and aesthetics as an essential part of the curriculum is actually challenging the premise that 'staged battles are without live ammunition' (Levy, 2001). I claim that there is no such thing in our classes as 'battles without live ammunition'. Since ethics are always involved in our professional deliberation, the result of our decisions could hold serious danger. When exploring the tension between ethics and aesthetics in the context of a school environment, we are dealing with live ammunition. In playing the gap between ethics and aesthetics, there are open opportunities to construct modes of knowing in which knowledge is not

objective, and is not passively received. Rather, it is constructed and shaped by the students' new insights and the variety of modes of connecting previous knowledge with the new (Glassersfeld, 1990). Many different drama strategies can be used in the classroom, but *all* must convey the essence of dramatic action, which is inherently a constructivist approach to learning. To teach in the way we preach is not only to give a personal example to our students, but also to have a profound belief in the power of theatrical ways of understanding the world to change basic attitudes and behaviours.

The students were involved in a process of knowing by doing, searching with their teacher for the right balance in meaning-making. 'Meaning-making', as Bolton argues, 'is to work on the assumption that engagement with the art form is to do with seeing something differently' (1992: 2). Here lies the danger: the students are *not* engaging with the art form, but with its instrumental opportunities. David entered the fiction and used it as a real-life arena. He broke the aesthetic distance; he shattered the convention of the 'as if' situation; he was himself. The convention of the theatre holds that suspension of disbelief is a mental exercise that becomes easier with practice and experience (Boyce, 1987). In the drama process, conventions are 'indicators of the way in which *time, space and presence* can interact and be imaginatively shaped to create different kinds of meanings in theatre' (Neelands, 1991: 4) An essential part of creating different kinds of meaning is exercising mental images, a process in which the line between reality and fiction is a fundamental characteristic.

The David/Mohammad case is a clear case in which the students misused the opportunity they were given. The blurring of boundaries happened so easily because the children were referring to the play as a tool for revenge. At this point precisely, when theatre loses its aesthetic-artistic value, when it has only an instrumental function, the theatre becomes dangerous. It is losing its aesthetic merit - and that is what causes the danger. We learn from Eisner that 'to confer aesthetic order upon our world is to make that world hang together, to fit, to feel right, to put things in balance, to create harmony. Such harmonies are sought in all aspects of life' (1988: 38). Such harmonies can be achieved by doing *things right* in process drama - that is, by allowing students to comprehend the similarities and differences among archetypal characters and to control the emotional and social impact of dramatic performances in their own life.

The polar encounter between a tense life-situation and a fictional situation building up is too dangerous. Even an experienced teacher can sometimes fail to keep a very tense and tricky situation under control; and thus faces ethical tensions.

The drama teacher should be aware of the power of mental images to destroy or to build, their ability to cure or wound. While working on a risky scene - especially when national or ethnic conflicts or extreme psychological elements are involved - a measure of caution is required to allow us to discover the mental images the students hold and how to prevent anyone from breaking the 'Charm of Drama'. The moral is inseparable from the artistic form. In relating to the 'quarrel scene' experience, it should be considered very seriously whether such a realistic form of presentation is a wise choice for children of that age in such tricky contexts. It is, possibly, beyond the ability of children to control situations that are so similar to those which are around us in our lives. Would it not be better for all concerned to work only with those situations in which we are sure that the aesthetic distance can be maintained?

Process drama does not begin and end with the audience, nor with the playwright, director or actors, as O'Toole argues (1992). Instead, he explains, the dramatic event should be viewed as a whole, and investigated through the experiences of all participants, and their roles in the creation of the work. It is in this context that the strong connections between mental images and ethical problems that might arise in the drama classes were clearly revealed in Lea's class. Sometimes we tend to forget that drama education is based both on the field of art and on the field of education. When an artistic need clashes with an educational purpose, the educational aspect should be the first to be considered. However, the drama activity should be regarded as an artistic activity, and not only as an instrumental one. When it is an art form, then there is an aesthetic distance between the fiction and real life. There is a safety net to prevent the teachers as well as the children from becoming victims of unnecessary tensions. When the aesthetic distance disappears, as was clearly demonstrated in the 'quarrel scene', art also vanishes. Only then does an ethical tension of this sort arise and might evolve into a real danger that even an expert teacher would find difficult to deal with. Perhaps we can now understand more fully the thesis of David Best in his book *The Rationality of Feeling*:

My thesis is not primarily concerned with whether responses are or are not spontaneous, but with showing that the kinds of feeling which are central to involvement with the arts are necessarily rational and cognitive in kind. To put it briefly, they are inseparable from understanding. (1992: 202)

It is worth considering that one way to nurture such an understanding is through a sensitive appreciation of mental images and a consideration of their use in the arts; thus, they can help to prevent unnecessary

ethical tensions in drama process within education.

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