

**Article 1**

**APPLIED THEATRE: PROBLEMS AND POSSIBILITIES**

**By Judith Ackroyd (UK)**

**Abstract**

This paper first considers the difficulty of determining the perimeters of the field of applied theatre, and proposes a grid made up of two continua measuring participation and transformation.. The author then investigates the implications of intentionality in theatre and calls for vigilance. Will theatre always be employed for noble, humanitarian means? **Judith Ackroyd** taught drama in secondary schools before moving into drama advisory work where she supported teachers in the primary as well as secondary phase. She is currently a senior lecturer in Drama at University College Northampton, UK. She has published widely in the field of drama in education, her most recent book being the edited Literacy Alive: Drama projects for literacy learning.

**Biography**

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## APPLIED THEATRE: PROBLEMS AND POSSIBILITIES

### Old aims, new title and diverse practices

The term Applied Theatre is relatively new. It brings together a broad range of dramatic activity carried out by a host of diverse bodies and groups. Many of those who would fall under the umbrella title of Applied Theatre may not be familiar with or even aware of those with whom they huddle. The dramatherapist sees her work as distinctly different from that of the group who employ drama to enhance the skills of a company sales team. The prison theatre practitioner will not necessarily relate to those using drama to support the elderly. The practitioners in each group will see themselves working with specific skills appropriate to their work and not therefore the same as those in other fields. How then can we gather diverse practices into one bundle? Some may be dragged screaming! A Christian street theatre group may not wish to reside alongside a company canvassing for the reduction of the legal age for sex between consenting adults of the same sex.

In the face of this plurality I suggest that it is an intentionality which all the various groups have in common. They share a belief in the power of the theatre form to address something beyond the form itself. So one group use theatre in order to promote positive social processes within a particular community, whilst others employ it in order to promote an understanding of human resource issues among corporate employees. The range is huge, including such as theatre for education, for community development, and for health promotion, and dramatherapy and psychodrama.

An intentionality is presupposed in all these examples. The intentions of course vary. They could be to inform, to cleanse, to unify, to instruct, to raise awareness. The use of theatrical form to achieve such intentions is not new. The Yoruba have used drama to reaffirm a sense of community through celebratory dramatic ritual from traditionally. It is widely held that the plays of Ancient Greece intended to cleanse, through katharsis. Mystery Plays have been used to provide instruction in Christianity, for example. These functions of theatre are not new. It is the term which is new.

Since theatre forms have been used for these purposes for so long, why do we now need to attach a new label? Why is it necessary to bring broad ranging theatre practices into the academy for dissection and analysis? I welcome the creation of a Centre for Applied Theatre Research and this new journal because I am convinced that we do need to bring these forms together for inspection for three main reasons.

The first is that the use of drama has grown so quickly, that it warrants our attention. It is no longer small groups of enthusiasts, or politically active individual writers who seek to utilise the powers of drama. Role play and simulation exercises are used in the training of managers in a way unthinkable thirty years ago and theatre extends into new territories as I write. So, something growing so quickly in many different directions, deserves our attention. The second reason is for the new perspective it can offer each of us engaging in applied theatre. Bringing these diverse groups together, seeking out what makes them distinctive as well as their commonalities will enrich our practice.

Thirdly, there is a crying need for evaluation of applied theatre. Research is required to look at the efficacy of applied theatre in its various forms. We need to know what distinctive contribution drama can make to changing attitudes and behaviour, and to be alert to any unintended consequences of using it. At the same time we need to appreciate that applied theatre is not only applied, but also theatre. So there is also a need for critical analysis of the theatre forms themselves.

### Family resemblances and distinguishing features

I have referred to intentionality as a common feature, but this is clearly not enough to define the term. Although it seems commonsensical to distinguish theatre and applied theatre, I wish to move away from a notion of two distinct forms, 'theatre' and 'applied theatre' and propose a continuum. As a preliminary let us envisage a continuum, at one end of which lies applied theatre in its most nakedly functional form. Here, the artform is a means to a quite distinct end which is not concerned with theatre form or practice. At the other end it gets more complex. It needs to include commercial, experimental and children's theatre.

Theatre < -----> Applied Theatre

This continuum is immediately reminiscent of a familiar drama education debate: drama as a 'dramatic art' (Hornbrook, 1998) and drama as a 'learning medium' (Wagner, 1979). I should like to

qualify the continuum I propose by stipulating my belief that nothing at either end of that continuum or between can exist without an understanding of theatre form. Applied theatre is applied theatre because it uses the art form of theatre. In order to experiment with that form there needs to be a prior understanding of it. So at both ends it is a prerequisite. In applied theatre the producers must consider what dramatic construction will best fulfill their purposes. The appropriate use of theatre form is essential in order for the intentions to be achieved. In this context it is noteworthy that at Roehampton Institute where a post graduate certificate is offered in dramatherapy, all students first learn practical theatre. This is described as 'a prerequisite for facilitating a theatre model of drama therapy' (Prospects Postgraduate Directory, 1999). An understanding of theatre is essential, in short, for any position on the continuum.

The continuum above is reminiscent of Schechner's famous efficacy-entertainment continuum. *Efficacy and entertainment are not so much opposed to each other; rather they form the poles of a continuum. .... No performance is pure efficacy or pure entertainment'* (Schechner, 1994, p120) He describes a performance that is efficacious as one whose purpose is to 'effect transformations'. We will consider this further in the next section. At this point however, we must consider whether a performance contrived to effect transformation, or in my words, to address something beyond the theatre form itself is sufficient for a definition of applied theatre.

Schechner identifies a period of high efficacy in British theatre history in the mid eighteenth century. Presumably, he is thinking of the so called, 'Sentimental plays'. *Love's Last Shift* (though written earlier in 1696) by Colley Cibber is often cited as an example of this genre of plays which intended to provide moral instruction. Whilst Schechner places it high in efficacy, and clearly it had an 'other' purpose, would we wish to define the play as applied theatre?

Let us take another more complex example. In 1773, Oliver Goldsmith wrote *She Stoops to Conquer* to make a point about theatre itself. Goldsmith uses his prologue to make his purpose abundantly clear to the audience. He fears for the death of comedy.

*Pray, would you know the reason why I'm crying? The Comic Muse, long sick, is now a-dying! And if she goes, my tears will never stop;*

and through his play proposes a remedy:

*One hope remains: hearing the maid was ill, A doctor comes this night to show his skill. To cheer her heart, and give your muscles motion, He in five draughts prepared, presents a potion: A kind of magic charm-for be assured, If you swallow it, the maid is cured.*  
(Goldsmith, no date, p. 85)

Goldsmith is concerned to resurrect his notion of comedy. His intention is to write a comic play and his concern is therefore with comic theatre form. Since it is concerned with theatre form, we may be inclined to place the play at the 'theatre' end of the continuum. Yet it is also clear that Goldsmith wanted to bring about a transformation! The audience were to take the medicine, to resurrect the comic muse, and to turn their backs on *a mawkish drab of spurious breed, Who deals in sentimentals*. (Ibid). So perhaps we should move it to the right, towards 'applied theatre' leaving it to the left of centre. *Love's Last Shift* could rest a little further right toward applied theatre than *The Peacemaker*, (Evans, 1985) which is a contemporary scripted play for school children. It tells of a wall dividing the Reds from the Blues. At the beginning of the play they know nothing about each other and obey commands to keep away from the wall. By the end they have discovered neither is demonic, they can be good friends, and they pull down the wall. The play is a delight in performance for its theatricality, its wit, and its dramatic tension. The message is very clear to adults and to many of the young children watching. Like *Hedda Gabler* and *She Stoops to Conquer*, it is scripted. Like them, it seeks both to entertain and at the same time convey a message, with a desire for change, or at least reevaluation. And yet *The Peacemaker* is more likely to be included on a course in applied theatre than the other two. Why?

Plotkin's essay on Applied Theatre distinguishes the field in a way that resembles Schechner's continuum, by identifying *some clear purpose overshadow[ing] the entertainment function* (Plotkin, 1997). However, I wonder if this doesn't entail demarcating the field in too inclusive a way. The outraged members of the audience who left the first production of *A Doll's House* decrying Ibsen would have identified the play in these terms: purpose overshadowing the entertainment function.. Their response was to a perceived purpose, not to theatrical entertainment. However, we would not expect to encounter this play within the field of applied theatre. So the desire to transform or overshadow the entertainment function with clear purpose is not by itself enough of a

distinguishing feature of applied theatre to demarcate the field.

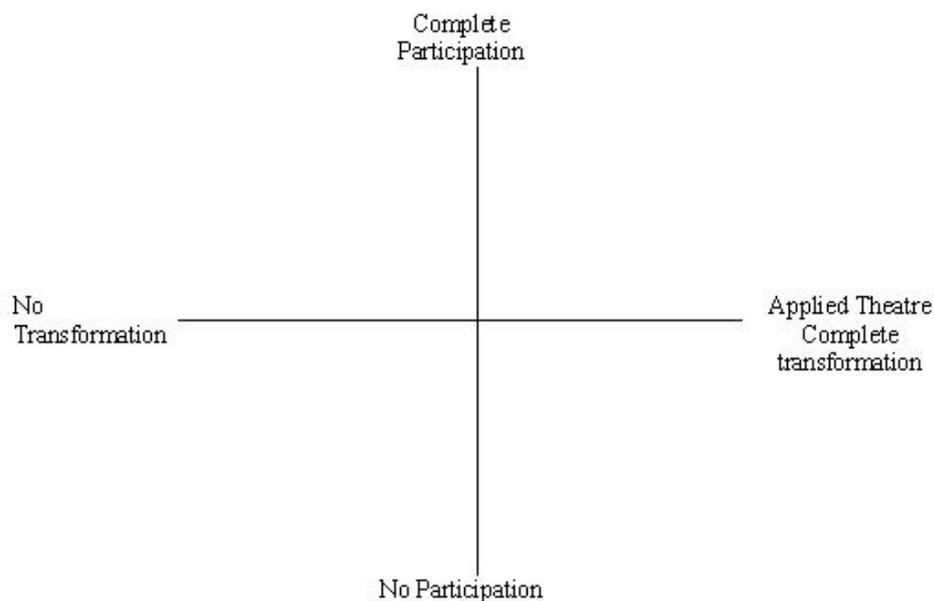
*The Peacemaker* was identified above as similar in many ways to the Ibsen and Goldsmith plays, yet it appears in a volume of 'theatre in education' texts which places it in the field of applied theatre. So..why is it different? In my experience of performance it is distinctly different. I have only ever seen the play accompanied by a workshop involving the participation of the audience. Perhaps the role of the audience is significant in characterising applied theatre.

Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed actively engages the audience, as does dramatherapy, drama in education, psychodrama and drama for work place training. In these cases, the audience move from being watchers to active participants. For Schechner, active participation constitutes a precondition for transformation to take place. *The Peacemaker* does not require the integral role of the audience during performance that O'Toole (1992), seeks for true theatre in education, but the programme includes full participation in follow-up workshop. There is not time here to consider the process of learning through dramatic engagement, but it is widely held that unless the children have explored ideas themselves, experimented and made what they watched their own experience, the learning opportunities will not be maximised.

However, I do not wish to suggest that theatre without any active audience participation cannot deliver a message or bring about 'a shift in appraisal' (Bolton, 1979). My own experiences prevent this. I imagine a performance of Kushner's *Angels in America* at the National Theatre, London, could not have been more significant to me had I been 'workshopped' for days. The performance knocked me for six, albeit as a still, silent observer. My experience of *Capricornia* performed by students of QPAT/QUT in Brisbane during the IDEA '95 conference provides another example of a play which carried an 'other' intention, though I was in no way physically involved with the creative process.

These examples would probably not, however, be classified as applied theatre.

This suggests that audience participation may be a further distinguishing feature of applied theatre..There is now a rationale for a second continuum relating to audience participation. At one end is audience as observer, at the other audience as participant. We are now in a better position to delineate our field. I have identified two features which I believe to be central to our understanding of applied theatre: an intention to generate change (of awareness, attitude, behaviour etc), and the participation of the audience. I have suggested that neither single handedly distinguishes theatre and applied theatre and that the distinction between them is a matter of degree. To clarify matters let us draw two new continua at right angles to each other. The first relates to the degree to which theatre forms are attempting to effect transformation; the second relates to the degree of audience participation. All theatre forms arguably entail some element of transformation however minimal, just..as they will entail some form of participation from the audience. At the same time it is hard to envisage a piece which could bring about a complete transformation, or complete participation. We should therefore not expect any theatre forms to be placed at the extreme ends of either continuum.



Most forms and texts which we would consider to be in the domain of applied theatre are located in..the top right hand quadrant. *A Doll's House* and *Love's Last Shift* also occupy a position towards the right due to their intention to transform, but they remain below the horizontal due to the nature of their audience's role and are therefore in the bottom right hand quadrant. *The Peacemaker* by contrast falls somewhere between the two.

This grid hopefully reveals what Wittgenstein describes as 'family resemblances' between such seemingly different theatre forms as drama therapy and Theatre in Education, and perhaps it goes some way to aid our identification of the distinguishing features which constitute the field of applied theatre.

### **For better or for worse**

Whatever I read of applied theatre is delightfully positive about its possibilities and achievements. Joel Plotkin for example, is drawn to the forms of theatre which may be labelled applied theatre

*for several reasons: first, a Brechtian attitude that theatre is a tool to make a better world by helping people look at their communities; second, dissatisfaction with commercial, academic, and even most avant-garde production; third, a personal need for spiritual, moral, and ethical purpose in focusing my limited vision and energy.*  
(Plotkin, 1997)

Course descriptions are enthusiastic. Manchester University offers a MA course in Applied Theatre

*which is normally taken to mean theatre which is applied to the needs arising from a particular social institution or marginalised community.*

It seems so sound and optimistic. However, in this third section I wish to consider the implications of the intentionality of applied theatre, and to raise the possibility that it may not always be employed for noble, humanitarian means.

We need to ask ourselves what purposes applied theatre activities are fulfilling and what values they are exemplifying. Looking at the course description above, for example, we can immediately identify a value system. Who defines the 'needs' of a particular institution for this course? And why *marginalised* communities? These questions are not asked or answered because certain assumptions come with the package.

Philip Taylor demonstrates that it is quite impossible for teachers and researchers to be value free.(1996, p14-16). This doesn't mean however, that no attempt should be made to avoid bias. Clearly, it should be. We have to live with the fact that each of us carry attitudes and values which will influence our work. Looking at much of the applied theatre forms frequently identified, there is an implicit political bias as evident in the course description above. In some cases theatre companies are explicit. Many groups nail their colours to the mast by their names. We are in no doubt, for example, about the perspective of the company, Gay Sweatshop. Theatre companies committed to education about drugs awareness are not going to be promoting drug abuse. So, we accept that these applied theatre forms have a particular intention and we accept that their performances will have been constructed according to particular ideologies. We are also likely to assume that they have some efficacy.

It is perhaps this efficacy that explains the controversy often generated by theatre. People outside the field are also aware that theatre can be influential. Those opposing the depiction of a homosexual Jesus on Broadway must be protesting because they feel that theatre has a power that may entice a possible new perspective of the Christ figure. Stalin banned *Hamlet* during the second world war. The Japanese censors demanded that all textual references to royalty be removed from Koreya Senda's 1938 production of the play, a request that must have removed much of the dialogue, (Richie, 1999). Brecht's theatre was of course, banned in Nazi Germany, whilst public theatres were closed during puritanical Cromwellian years in England. Theatre has been perceived as a dangerous tool to many in positions of power. Plays have been cut and prohibited (*A Doll's House* was not performed in its entirety in England or America until ten years after it was written), and theatres have even been closed. So, the powerful potential for theatre to influence, to raise awareness, to inform and in short, to transform, is and has been widely assumed.

My question is, therefore, if theatre has been applied to the job of opening minds to new perspectives, to increasing self esteem, to bringing together disparate communities, why should it not be used to produce restricted perspectives implying criticism of others, to reduce self esteem and confidence with ideas, to divide and fragment established communities?

With the growth in applied theatre it may not be emerging extremist playwrights or public, open performances that we need to be wary of, but something quite different. Our artform may be used for arguably unworthy causes, for shifts in market positions, for example, rather than 'shifts in appraisal'. Many in our field may have shared drama practice with those in business. Fair enough, but how far should we go? Should arts be used to improve staff self presentation skills? Should drama be used to promote sales? What about tobacco companies? Is it legitimate for drama to be used to any ends which our sponsors support? In some ways the issue of values is writ large when it comes to applied theatre. A local authority in the United Kingdom aware of drama's potential, used its drama support team for improvement in many ways. The drama team was enlisted to help with governor training. A day came when they refused to help. It was when the drama team were asked to use theatre to encourage governors to feel good about themselves, rather than guilty, when they sacked teachers... If it is known to be effective, why would those with the finances to develop not use applied theatre to dubious as well as positive ends? We must be prepared for theatre to be used for ends we wouldn't necessarily agree with.

A close look at Schechner's efficacy-entertainment continuum is illuminating. He asserts that performances which aim for maximum efficacy will probably have a range of other features in common, too. The audience participates, there is collective creativity, but more significantly, criticism is discouraged (Schechner, 1994, p. 120). Whilst he is referring here to ritual, the extreme case in efficacy, most of us would be highly suspicious of applied theatre processes which do not allow for criticism.

The aims of drama in education have been more modest in articulation, though perhaps not in spirit.. We have all believed we can create a drama which will encourage, or actually, 'force' pupils to look again at the implications of bullying so that it is less likely to happen again amongst that class group. We believe that steadily, though admittedly slowly, we can chip away at the playground culture and create a better experience for the children. (I'm not the only one, am I?) We want a more secure..school environment; we want a different attitude; we want an emerging sense of community; we want..a transformed playground. In class drama we ensure reflection. We encourage a distanced consideration of what we have been involved in. Morgan and Saxton describe distancing as the strategy which allows the students to find meaning in situations which, by their immediacy, might inhibit exploration. (1987, p. 136) This signifies a stepping outside the all embracing and all encompassing form, to counteract the felt experience with reflective practice. If these practices are neglected, something dangerous emerges. But what really bothers me is this: I have no difficulty in imagining how I could construct a drama which could encourage a group to run into mortal combat..with vigor and conviction. More frightening is that I can imagine designing a series of workshops which use the emotion in the drama to instill an antipathy to a group in a real community. Well, can't you?

And we would draw on the features Schechner refers to for maximum efficacy in ritual: full participation, collective creativity and we would deliberately neglect that reflective mode which encourages a distanced objectivity.

It is not enough to look at whether or not the theatre piece achieves its ends. We also need to ask whether or not those ends should be achieved. Whose needs are served by a drama applied to calming inmates or young people in care? The inmates and young people? The authorities? Both? Is it efficacious as in Schechner's definition because there is no space for dissent? To decide whether or not the ends being sought are appropriate is clearly highly contentious. In our struggle to reach conclusion, I suggest a question may help us: are the ends in question publicly debated and defended? We might conclude,

**Yes for the bullying drama and the HIV education theatre project. No for theatre to promote smoking.**

Other cases are more difficult to pin down. Take for example the training for governors to sack staff. It could be raised for public debate. Perhaps it could be defended since the governors may need the training to manage the situation better for the benefit of the teacher losing her job, as much as for the governor herself. There are still areas of grey but this benchmark may take us a step further in assessing intentions delivered through applied theatre.

In conclusion I suggest that there is a danger of applied theatre being seen as a technique and to forget not only that theatre is an artform, but also whose needs are being met. We forget at our peril the question of what applied theatre is for. We need to ensure that our practice comprises more than simulation exercises and role play, that it is truly reflective, and that we debate the purposes of what we are doing. Applied theatre is a mighty form and like fire can work for us or against us.

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## PART TWO

I wish to describe a particular applied theatre project prepared with sociologist, Andrew Pilkington. We called the drama The Sins of the Fathers. It represents a piece which has an intention as will be seen, and also engages its audience as active participants who performed, as I did. It offers various viewpoints and different positions of distance for reflection. We will move through the stages of the drama and the thinking behind it.

*We, the British Government, express 'regret' for the Irish famines in the years 1845-49, when we failed to provide support, leaving thousands to starve to death.*

*We, the Japanese government, express 'deep remorse and heart felt apology' for the treatment of British prisoners during the second world.*

*'As a country, we are burdened by past actions that resulted in weakening the identity of aboriginal peoples, suppressing their languages and cultures, and outlawing spiritual practices. The Government of Canada today formally express to all Aboriginal people in Canada our profound regret for past actions of the Federal government which have contributed to these difficult pages in the history of our relationship together.'*

*We, the American government, 'apologise' for the Tuskegee experiment, which involved suffering and death for black people, who were lulled into believing that they were being treated when in fact government doctors were observing the rate and symptoms of their deterioration.*

We live in an age of disbelief, where the grand narratives of the past no longer have credibility. The nation states of the West continue to dominate the world order and particular ethnic groups remain privileged within nation states. The old triumphalism however, has gone. Ruling groups no longer believe that they have a mission to civilise the world and a self confident belief in superiority grounded in nature is now rarely articulated. Voices from the margins can no longer be silenced. The result is that increasingly alternative histories and perspectives clamour for our attention. In this context ruling groups find it difficult to shore up established national and ethnic identities and establish their legitimacy in the eyes of others. For we are all too aware that these identities are constructed, that the histories underlying them are selective, and that from the point of view of others our privilege depends upon barbarism in the past. Cultural relativism flourishes in this multicultural world. But it does not prevent us acknowledging that our history is characterised by evil actions. For liberal democracies subscribe to certain values and in terms of these values allowing people to starve, maltreating prisoners of war, destroying minority cultures, and conducting medical experiments on people without their consent, is wrong.

An acknowledgement that our history is characterised by barbaric actions can generate different responses. We may feel that actions which we now consider barbaric need to be judged by the standards of their age; we may feel that we are not responsible for the actions of our ancestors. Or we may feel shame and perhaps guilt at what has been done by our forefathers-especially when the descendants of the groups who were so badly treated in the past continue to be disadvantaged and continue to remind us of their 'ancient grudge'. Or we may seek to synthesise all these responses as some official histories in our museums attempt to do, albeit in a somewhat contradictory manner.

Recently an intriguing new phenomenon has been evident - the apology. Struck by the plethora of recent apologies by governments for the actions of previous generations, we wanted to construct a drama to explore the motives, meanings and consequences of such apologies. Is the apology given out of genuine remorse or driven by political manoeuvring? Why might an apology be withheld? What does an apology signify? Is it a genuine attempt to come to terms with the past and move on? Or is it a symbolic gesture, a substitute for real action to remedy the consequences of past actions and a justification of a system which merely pretends to have changed? Will an apology alleviate a deeply felt hurt or will it have unintended consequences, perhaps being decoded as a cynical, political move?

### STAGE 1

*It is good for us to meet together in this way. It is good that we remember the lives of the Bagels who have gone before us. It is right that we tell our story to our children so that they understand the evils that were committed against our forbears.*

*We gather here for the 244th year to retell the events that occurred when they arrived, when the Yetta came here. That's when Bagel lives changed; they took over Bagel land, they stopped Bagels from gathering for religious festivals, they took all that was dear to the Bagels, taking away our children, disturbing all that we knew and loved.*

*We have all heard of these terrible days and gather each year so that we do not forget and so that we never allow it to happen again. All Bagel families have their own stories which have been passed down the generations. Grandparents and parents have retold these stories so that new generations will know exactly what took place. It is now the turn of each new adult here to tell their stories as they have been passed down.*

*I will begin by telling a story that has been passed down through my family.*

Takes a step forward

*I'll never forget the day they came to our community. We knew as soon as we heard the marching feet, as soon as we saw the raised arms. We knew they had come for our children. We knew, too, that it was death to resist. My child was prised from my arms. 'Hannah, Hannah'*

*The joy when the end of the term came and the children were returned to us.*

*Reaching arms out and miming an embrace 'Hannah, Hannah.' I cried holding her close.*

*'Hannah?' she said. 'Hannah', I said. 'Yettira', she said. 'No, no Hannah, my Hannah!' 'Hannah' she said.*

*The holiday came and went. The term dragged by, but soon my child was returned to me.*

*Arms stretched to hold the imagined child*

*'Hannah, my dearest Hannah. You are home.' 'Hannah?', she said. 'Hannah,' I laughed. 'Yettira, Mama.' 'Hannah' 'Yettira' 'Hannah (points nervously now) Mama (points).*

*'Hannah?' 'Yes, my child, Hannah' 'Hannah' she said.*

*For Hannah's third holiday we had again prepared celebrations Yearning arms reaching out*

*'Hannah, my Hannah' 'Yettira'. 'Hannah' 'Yettira' 'No. You are Hannah, Hannah, (with increasing desperation) Hannah!' 'No. You are mistaken. I am Yettira'*

Takes step back to original position *Our children were torn from us. Parents found they no longer knew those whose lives they had celebrated and cherished. We will never forget the pain of our forbears.*

Thus began our drama with student teachers.

The students in small groups now devise a story and prepare a presentation of that story. The Bagel meeting is reconvened and the stories told in turn by a narrator from each group, with other members providing images or action to support the narration. The teacher in role reaffirms the points made by each group:

*They took everything from our children*

*We all saw the pain of parting in their eyes There was no mercy*

*The woman died alone in pain and misery*

*They are thanked for their stories and the gathering is formally closed.*

## **STAGE 2**

The space is reorganised and all sit around a board room table ready to take on their new roles as members of the Yetta Council Chamber. The teacher as Chair, addresses them:

*I have called this meeting because there is an issue that I feel all members of the Yetta Council Chamber need to discuss.*

*We still have a pressing problem to cope with. There is still criticism abroad about our treatment of the Bagels. In view of the impending election, it is really urgent that we ward off as soon as possible any potential damage to our international reputation. You'll remember that we commissioned an independent enquiry to report on the situation re the Bagels. The report detailed the following points:*

- 1. Land that belonged to the Bagels has for the most part been returned*
- 2. Their rights of worship have been restored. They are allowed to meet and worship according to their beliefs.*
- 3. Legislation has been brought into place to provide for Equal Opportunities What more can we do?*

A number of points were raised:

*We need to be seen to be doing something There's danger in silence*

*Who is informing people abroad about the Bagels? It's about things a long time ago*

*We must respect our ancestors' wishes*

*But what's the point of respecting our ancestors if we can't protect ourselves? The teacher in role suggests a formal apology for the past:*

*It may make us seem woolly and they may take advantage of it*

*We need to think of something that gets the best publicity without doing anything We need to keep the upper hand*

*They may see through it Bagels aren't clever like us*

*Perhaps they are being stirred up by those abroad They may get violent if nothing is done*

*Are you prepared to fight? Conflict is not good for the young*

*Do we really want to have equal rights?*

The teacher in role reminds the Chamber that many political leaders have given formal apologies in recent years and suggests that they consider the pros and cons of a Yetta apology for past treatment. of Bagels.

They list the pros:

*It's right because we and the Bagels need to let go of the past. It would clean the slate and encourage a new start*

*Life would be a lot easier for children if there was no animosity between groups We would appear good and improve our public image*

*It may help us to stave off a bad election result and gain us Bagel votes. It could actually avoid internal war*

and the cons:

*We weren't responsible*

*It would be for something so long ago An apology might alienate elder Yetta It could make us look weak*

*The Bagels might not accept an apology and feel that we owe them more They would feel that we were mocking them*

*Whatever we do won't satisfy them*

Although we are living in an era in which governments are less reluctant than in the past to apologise, we must not assume that apologies - even for the actions of previous generations - are

given without cost. Demands for an apology are made when members of a group feel that a serious injustice has been committed against them. Such requests are by no means always met, however. For example, Indian pleas for an apology for the massacre of innocent people at Amritsar; Irish entreaties for the awful atrocity of Bloody Sunday to be acknowledged; and Aboriginal demands for recompense for the 'stolen children'; have not been accepted. And this is partly because it has been felt that 'an apology might alienate our elders' and 'could make us look weak' and indeed unmanly. It might be assumed that apologies for ancient grudges might be more easily given. To have credibility, however, apologies given by governments need widespread support among their populations and this may not be forthcoming if the apology is 'for something a long time ago' or, as is the case in some cultures, is seen as dishonouring ones ancestors. The drama enables us to understand why an apology may not be given and, when given, the diverse motives which may underlie it. In this particular drama, an apology is of course forthcoming from the Yetta!

The teacher in role suggests that they carefully consider the wording of their apology. After some discussion, during which the word 'apologise' itself is jettisoned because it 'sounds very empty', they agree on the following:

***We publicly acknowledge and regret the atrocities committed against you, the Bagels by our ancestors.***

### **STAGE THREE**

The space is reorganised. The sentence is written on a board and again the students change roles. The teacher in role addresses them:

*You have been commissioned to advise the Leader on the most effective way to deliver the apology. The whole world is watching and the apology must be delivered in such a way so that it will achieve the desired effect. It is crucial that we get this right. You have been chosen because you are considered to be the top of the tree in public relations. We chose you because we cannot afford to make a mistake. You will work in teams. Each team must create a proposal and demonstrate how the apology might best be delivered.*

One team recommends a solitary seated figure. The leader speaks directly to the camera with legs uncrossed and hands gently laid on lap. This is interpreted as creating a sincere, approachable, personal connection between the leader and the Bagels.

Another team presents five figures in a line walking slowly forward. The middle figure delivers the apology whilst the others link hands with their heads bowed. This is seen as the Yetta moving forward to meet the Bagels, with bowed heads signifying regret and joined hands signifying togetherness.

A third team places the leader on a chair. She steps down and, flanked by four other figures with heads bowed, soberly speaks the apology. This is thought not to present a soft enough image. For while the stepping down may be read by the Bagels as an attempt by the leader to reach out to them as equals, the flanking figures may be seen as aggressive, the iron fist behind the velvet glove.

### **STAGE FOUR**

The students are asked to return to their role as Bagels, with the teacher in role chairing a meeting in which they discuss their response to the apology delivered by the Yetta.

Very different responses are forthcoming:

*I'd feel like a traitor accepting this apology We need a new start*

*I am shocked that they have apologised They're probably after something*

*What are they apologising for? It's time we put this behind us*

*We should move on, but never forget*

*We're in the same situation as a year ago*

*Why are they doing this now? Is it real? Or do they want our votes? Haven't we already moved on?*

*Some still can't accept us*

*The apology was an empty gesture It doesn't change anything*

*We've got to think of the younger generation*

*We're in the position where we can make things change*

We were surprised that the Bagels - though clearly aware of the manufactured nature of the apology - were so ready to accept the Yetta gesture. We had anticipated that the students, who had just been engaged in the marketing of the apology, would, as Bagels, have reacted far more angrily to the apology or at least have expressed disappointment, as Jews have done in response to the Vatican's recent 'act of repentance' for the actions of some Roman Catholics during the second world war. Indeed, we had prepared a further stage in the drama which was designed to offer an alternative response to the apology. As it happened we did not need to wheel in our mixed couple comprising a radical Yetta and a grateful-for-the-apology Bagel! Later discussion with the students revealed that their overriding concern was to put wrongs right. They wanted the Bagels and the Yetta. to live without discord. Not accepting the apology would move them further from their goal.

## STAGE FIVE

Moving from the fictional world, student groups are each given a card on which is printed a recent apology given by a government in the real world. They are asked to devise a dramatic image to represent the apology. The image could involve movement, but not words. The images are presented while the teacher reads the apology out loud.

The images

- 1. We, the British Government, express 'regret' for the Irish famines in the years 1845-49, when we failed to provide support leaving thousands to starve to death.**

The decision to make an apology is represented as one made in a cavalier manner over a cup of tea..For the person apologising is casually sitting down, drinking tea, while beside her are three figures bent over in agony. The figures are clearly representative of those who starved to death and the person apologising of a government, whose apology does not stem from deep remorse but from political manouvering.

- 2. We, the Japanese government, express 'deep remorse and heart felt apology' for the treatment of British prisoners during the second world war.**

The apology is depicted in a formal manner. The characters line up and bow their heads slowly, one after the other. It is difficult to decide whether the apology really does express deep remorse. For the apology is culturally coded and is difficult to decipher by members of another culture.

- 3. 'As a country, we are burdened by past actions that resulted in weakening the identity of aboriginal peoples, suppressing their languages and cultures, and outlawing spiritual practices. The Government of Canada today formally express to all Aboriginal people in Canada our profound regret for past actions of the Federal government which have contributed to these difficult pages in the history of our relationship together.'**

Two figures are first seen pushing another figure down with stylised movements. A figure from the side appears, smiling with arms outstretched in a supportive manner. The figure initially pushed down slowly begins to rise, but on nearly reaching an upright position, finds that an arm - stiffly stretched above her head - restricts any further move towards the upright position. The dramatic image expresses a sense of 'You can rise, but only so far' with stunning clarity.

- 4. We, the American government, 'apologise' for the Tuskegee experiment, which involved suffering and death for black people, who were lulled into believing that they were being treated when in fact government doctors were observing the rate and symptoms of their deterioration.**

The apology is represented as an example of spin doctoring. The President, accompanied by the press corps, arrives. Conscious of his media image and the photo opportunity the delivery of the apology gives him, he dons an expression of deeply felt remorse to the awaiting photographers and journalists before moving off, smiling and saluting the crowds.

## REFLECTIONS

Intrigued by the scepticism evident in these images, we decided to give the same apologies to another group of students who had not taken part in the drama. These students were simply asked to create an image that would represent the apology on their card. The images are striking for their lack..of cynicism. One group depicted a central figure delivering an apology behind a block, with others. either side on their knees, while another group pictured the person delivering the apology,

accompanied by others with their heads bowed. The first explained their kneeling as 'an expression of shame', while the second explained their bowed heads as 'looking down with guilt'. The difference between the images of apology created by those who had and those who had not experienced the drama suggests that the dramatic fiction sensitised them to the problematic nature of political apologies and generated a more critical approach.

As drama practitioners we are aware that students bring their experiences, mediated by different cultural identities to the fictions (Gallagher, 1997), it was quite extraordinary, to discover after the drama, that two students had interpreted the unfolding drama as specifically about their distinctly different experiences: in one case about black/white relations, in the other case about the persecution of the Jews. The first spoke of the shame she had felt for being white when she had lived in Swaziland four years earlier. All aspects of the drama, for this student, contributed to her interpretation. The second spoke of her surprise when the 'real' apologies were handed out at the end, because she had perceived the drama as concerned with forgiveness for the wiping out of her husband's (Jewish) family during the second world war. The name, Bagel supported her meaning-making. When the name Yetta emerged, which is also familiar to her as a Jewish name, she built this into her interpretation. This name was, she surmised, used to ensure that the Yetta were not viewed simply as the 'enemy'. We are left wondering how many other dramas were being played out.

The drama explores the motives, meanings and consequences of political apologies. It homes in on the fictional world of the Bagels and Yetta to do this and in the process expands our understanding of a new phenomenon. What it does not address, however, is the question of why such apologies have become so prevalent in the 1990s. In moving from our fictional world and turning to this question, more conventional teaching methods, such as a seminar, are appropriate. It is worth encouraging students to engage in speculation, however. For the sociological imagination involves speculating even if at the end of the day our imaginings need to be critically interrogated in terms of their internal coherence and correspondence to the facts. Engaging here in our own speculation, five features of the late twentieth century, we shall suggest, predispose governments to consider apologising for the actions of their predecessors.

The advent of a new century, indeed a new millennium, has encouraged further reflection on the past. For many commentators, this has been a sobering experience. One depicts the twentieth century as 'the most unstable, dangerous and degrading phase of human history' characterised by 'genocidal wars, fire-bombed cities, nuclear explosions, concentration camps, orgies of private blood-letting. Should we not' he asks, 'feel ashamed of what we have done to each other during this long century of violence?' (Keane, 1996, p185).

The nineteenth century faith in progress has disintegrated in the wake of our long century of violence. The Enlightenment project has consequently been re-evaluated and modernity itself seen as the root of our plight. In this context, few governments are able to view their past as unblemished. Atrocities characterise all histories and most liberal democratic regimes are no longer able to pretend otherwise. It is a short step from such an acknowledgement to the emotional response of shame and, given particular circumstances, the possibility of apology.

Globalisation is one of the defining features of the late twentieth century. For our lives are increasingly, and remarkably quickly, influenced by distant events. The result is that 'we have to learn to cope with an overwhelming sense of compression of our spatial and temporal worlds' (Harvey, 1989, p240). It is no longer possible in the 'global village' to ignore different cultures and, as the voices from the margins refuse to remain silent, to maintain that modernity is an unblemished blessing.

Established identities are unsettled (Ackroyd and Pilkington, 1997) and, although there are attempts to shore these up by pretending that they have remained sturdy and virtuous since time immemorial, their constructed, and therefore malleable, nature becomes more evident. The coexistence of competing accounts of the past challenges attempts to construct a progressive history and increases the likelihood that we shall acknowledge old atrocities, feel some shame about them and be more inclined to apologise for them. And once some regimes do this, the likelihood of others following suit becomes, given globalisation, more probable.

To acknowledge past atrocities is one thing; to apologise for them is quite another. What predisposes governments to move from one to the other is a recognition that some groups in the 'global village' have ancient grievances and that these grievances challenge the legitimacy of liberal democracy. The authority of liberal democratic regimes depends on their espousal of certain values and their recognition of citizenship rights. When it is manifest that governments have not adhered to these values and ignored people's rights, a crisis of hegemony ensues. One way of seeking to restore legitimacy is to apologise for past atrocities. We were wrong to sterilise the mentally

handicapped but we have learned the errors of our ways and of course no longer flout people's rights in this way.

Clearly governments have a vested interest in claiming that barbarism is a thing of the past and that the system has since been reformed. In the case of Sweden's compulsory sterilisation policy, this is indeed the case. Whether the same can be said of all regimes which have apologised for medical experiments on people is another matter. Certainly the discovery that some companies are testing drugs on AIDS sufferers in Africa suggests otherwise.

When we have sinned, we have traditionally sought atonement. Such a discourse, however, is now less prevalent in an increasingly secular world. A new discourse, which in many ways is functionally equivalent, has taken its place - a therapeutic discourse in which we are enjoined to take responsibility for our actions through exorcising old demons and starting afresh. This phenomenon is evident in the decisions of governments to apologise for past misdeeds. Renewal demands that we take responsibility for our actions and put the past behind us.

The search for a new way may be motivated by a genuine concern to put right past mistakes. Alternatively it may be a marketing strategy, a form of repackaging where nothing substantial has changed. We live in a world where media images bombard us on all sides. According to Baudrillard these images are so pervasive that we increasingly find it difficult to distinguish representation and reality (Poster, 1988). We don't have to go as far as this to recognise that images may masquerade as realities. Just as 'Watergate' was reported, in Baudrillard's view, as a scandal to conceal the fact that political corruption is rife, political apologies may be represented as a substantial achievement when in reality they are merely symbolic gestures and substitutes for real action.

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