

**Article 4**

**DOWN THE YELLOW BRICK ROAD**

**By Peter O'Connor (New Zealand)**

**Abstract**

Down the Yellow Brick Road traces the development of one drama teacher's praxis. In searching for ways to make meaningful drama with young offenders in Britain or children with special needs in New Zealand the author reflects on the tensions between playing drama for social change and drama as a process for telling stories.

**Author's Biography**

Peter O'Connor currently manages the national project to counter stigma and discrimination associated with mental illness for the New Zealand Mental Health Foundation. Peter previously taught drama at secondary and tertiary levels. Peter has written numerous school drama texts and is currently enrolled in a research higher degree at Griffith University.

## DOWN THE YELLOW BRICK ROAD

**"So in the end drama gives the kids the kind of things they need like a heart and courage in their real lives This drama stuff is quite symbolic isn't it?"**

For six years in the 1990s I worked with students from Pakuranga College's Pegasus Unit. Pakuranga College is a coeducational school of nearly two thousand students in a middle class suburb of Auckland, New Zealand. The Pegasus Unit is a special needs learning centre within the school that caters for students with intellectual disability. The eighteen students aged between 13 and 20 have a range of learning and language abilities and come from a range of ethnic backgrounds.

In looking back at the work I undertook with this group and their two classroom teachers I am aware of a number of themes that have shaped my own working life in drama education and how that impacted on my work with the students.

Four years prior to working with the Pegasus Unit students I had spent two years working in the Secure Unit at Stamford House Regional Remand Centre in London. There I had worked with young men under the age of 17 who were on remand or sentenced for crimes that, if they were adults, they would be serving 14 years or more. With Riverside Studios, a fringe theatre company, I had instigated a drama project that involved all 32 of the Unit's clients. In that work I became increasingly interested in how the personal narratives of the young men could be used to explore issues of common concern. The narratives largely focussed on missing dads, on poverty, and on alcohol and drugs. I spent much of my time in the unit searching for how the drama process could provide a language for the students to explore these issues within a safe and non-threatening environment

My next two years were spent at Bedford's Park Comprehensive in Harold Hill, East London. Harold Hill at one point had been the largest Council Estate in Europe and housed the families and descendants of Eastenders who had been moved there after the blitz. I worked with the students who had been placed (dumped may be more accurate) into a class called General Studies. We bought an allotment where we spent hours digging in vegetables and listening to the amazing stories of World War Two air crew who shared our garden. Our class became known as the 'double diggers', because I came from New Zealand and as a reference to our role in the First World War and also because potatoes have to be double dug. We also did drama. And a lot of it. Again I was drawn to finding out how their stories could find some kind of form within the drama process.

They were the kids we refer to as the disenfranchised, the 'at risk kids', the 'kids on the margins'. What deeply interested me about working alongside these young people was not how I could become a missionary and change their lives. I wanted drama to do some simple things, not change the world. I remember so clearly when in exasperation with a young student I asked "Don't you want to make something of yourself, get out of Harold Hill?" His reply was brief but to the point.

"Harold Hill is good enough for my father and it's good enough for me "

I wanted drama to provide an opportunity for them to tell their own stories, initially to themselves and later to others. I wanted the drama process to provide an aesthetic language usually denied to working class young people. And I wanted somehow either in the dingy confines of a secure unit or in the bleakness of a large council estate to provide some colour, and some creativity. I wanted some good belly laughs for myself and the young people I was working with.

Drama wasn't there to liberate, to change their worlds. Drama is a powerful tool but when you've been convicted of murder at thirteen it's going to take more than a few drama sessions to change that around. What it did though was to begin to create another language by which these young people could explore what their lives mean.

As I began work with the Pegasus Unit I was challenged by the notion that these were young people who not only had limited verbal language but also had, by and large, been denied access to any aesthetic language. Even drawing had largely been limited to colouring in. How would they be able to tell their stories? How could I provide a meaningful aesthetic language for them to use? How could I bring some creativity and colour into the unit?

I struggled with the notion that if drama is about meaning making, then what meanings could I make with young people with such limited intellectual capacity? How could our drama create shared meanings?

Would it be possible to know what those meanings might be? And what of those people whose developmental stage meant they were unable to take role? What drama could I make with those who had never even reached the stage of playing peek-a-boo because the ability to be yourself and some one else at the same time is beyond them? What of those students for whom the language of symbol and abstraction was beyond their intellectual capability?

How could I tap into their narratives, when the narrative for many of them appeared locked into the ever-present tense?

My first working weeks in the unit were spent in establishing relationships with the students and the teaching and support staff. It meant we had cups of tea, I sat with crayons and coloured in pictures, we played cricket and rugby. We didn't do any drama for weeks. During this time, I was searching for a way in, some theatre frame, a piece of narrative or a question that they might want to explore. What did they have some expertise in that I could tap into? One day over a cup of tea one of the teachers said: "You know, the thing these kids know a lot about is being cared for. They have had people care for them all their lives "

That sentence became the way in I would attempt to create dramas where the students, for a change, could become the carers of someone who needed help. I also knew it would help build my relationship with the students if I was to take a role where they were going to help me. The tasks they would be set in the drama would draw on the enormous experience and knowledge the students had in caring for others. By placing them in the role of expert carers, the 'mantle of the expert' (Heathcote, 1984) would effect a transfer of power so that I, the teacher, would be learning from the students as experts in caring.

My aim in setting the drama up in such a way was to provide the students an opportunity to re-tell their experiences of good caring, of providing a language that they could use to make sense of their own need to be cared for.

I chose to play the role of a character called Roger who lived very much on his own in a cave in the middle of the school's drama room. I made Roger's cave out of two upturned desks and a large sheet of black material.

I collected the students from the Unit and took them into the drama room. A number of them were drawn to the cave and started to look around and in it. I said that we could play a game where I would act as if I was someone who lived in the cave and that they could meet that person. I asked if they could act as if they were adults who lived near the cave. We practised walking like grown-ups Those who had good language skills led the way and those with little ability followed behind. We practised (or rehearsed) how adults shake hands and introduce themselves. Some could do both tasks and some couldn't.

I got the students to sit in small groups and tell stories about people they liked, people who cared for them. Some could tell stories and all of them could listen to or at least hear stories. I asked them to show me in their groups what it looked like if someone cared for someone else. There were lots of hugs, lots of laughter, a little embarrassment and from one group, some gentle patting and stroking.

I got the students to then gather around the cave and said "Could you act now as if you are the adults who live near this cave?"

I waited for the odd yes or nod of the head and noticed again that once some starting nodding others followed. I then said "I'm going to put on this cloak and go into the cave and act as if I'm Roger the person who lives there."

So began a drama that lasted for nearly a year. Roger asked for help in all sorts of ways. He told them he had never seen himself and so could they paint a picture of what he looked like so he could see it. Together we worked out what we thought Roger might look like and created a picture of a delightfully friendly dragon like creature. The picture ended up as a 3 metre x 2 mural on the drama room wall. We had a launch of our art work that my daughter who was three at the time attended. As a student herself now at Pakuranga College she was delighted to find Roger still on the drama room wall acting as its guardian and no one too sure who or what he is.

In discussions with the students and the teachers I discovered that very few of the students had been to a restaurant. Roger therefore wanted to go to a restaurant. Too scared to leave the cave we had to create one for him in the drama room. A trip to the local pub and a tour of the kitchens and a chance to make our own desserts (ice cream for miles would be a fair description) prepared us for the opening for one day only of the Crystal Palace Restaurant. Rarotongan rock music, a portable kitchen, waiters

and chefs prepared lunch for four staff who had won the lunch as a raffle prize, of course overseen by Roger.

When one of our students, David, was diagnosed with terminal cancer we were faced with how we would say goodbye. Roger decided that he needed to move on and so as a group we planned how we might say goodbye to Roger. Presents were made and a lunch was prepared. We made up small speeches and those who could read practised them. One by one as I sat under the sheet I heard the sound of the students come up to the cave. Some just left their presents, painted rocks that still sit on my work desk, others whispered things that I couldn't hear or comprehend but I could tell they were deeply felt. I heard the unmistakeable sound of David's crutches and the soft padding of his one foot as he made his way to the cave. He stopped and said

"It must be an awfully sad thing to have to leave. Goodbye I'll miss you." I choked back simply "Goodbye I'll miss you too."

I didn't see it but the teachers in the room told me that the last part of the sentence was said as David swivelled on his crutches and spoke to the group in front of him.

What meaning did the drama give to David's premature death? I really don't know if the rituals of our farewells acted as a rehearsal for understanding the adult and distanced funeral we went to. I don't know if any of the students caught the full impact of David's farewell to Roger, although I know one of the students not long after the funeral told me he thought it was great that David had a chance to say goodbye to Roger. Another student told me how he thought it was sad that both David and Roger had left. Yet another told me he knew that when we were saying goodbye to Roger we were really saying goodbye to David and he hated me for making him say goodbye twice.

I'll never know what meaning or purpose the drama gave to David.

Over the next few years the drama room became home to an assortment of people who needed help, nurturing or simply love. Gerry, who features in the drama created by Gavin Bolton about a young boy in a car accident (Morgan and Saxton, 1987), became a young boy in a bike accident. We repaired his bike in metal work classes, and learnt how to ride it in road safety classes. We made a tape of relaxing music for him in music classes. We wrote him get well cards in English, and in art made a full life-size model for him to be able to recuperate on the camp stretcher we used as his hospital bed. We learnt how to talk to people who are sick, we learnt how to talk to his parents about their worries. In the end we learnt how to welcome someone home, to throw a great party and sing songs and celebrate Gerry's recovery and his and our lives.

We met someone who was a visitor from another planet and built him a home in woodwork, and made him some warm clothes in sewing classes. We taught him how to talk in a way that everyone could understand what he was saying. We took him in his house to MacDonalds for breakfast and in the end we helped him go home.

The students were increasingly confident with the taking of role of working with me as a multitude of roles, and they were beginning to enjoy the possibilities of role taking. So much so that one day the request came as we sat at morning tea.

"Can we make a play? I want to wear a costume Can we?"

And so began a process that was to take us three years later to the IDEA Congress in Brisbane to perform our own self-scripted play.

Our first performed piece was a fifteen-minute piece called A Love Story. A mime piece with stylised choreographed movements, it was performed with local senior citizens sharing the stage. It was winter and the students had been watching movie videos including the classic The Wizard of Oz. Our playbuilding then became exploring what it meant to be scared when you're lost and can't get your way home. We playbuilt around what people need to do to get some courage, to get a brain, to find a heart. Our show, The Yellow Brick Road, lasted about 30 minutes and we took it on tour.

I realised that the process drama work over three years had given them a strong understanding of the language of theatre, even for those with limited verbal language skills. They knew how to build tension, to delay and tease an audience, and some of them knew how to terrify me as each performance was simply another run at a sort of story we had worked out. I was never to know if the scarecrow would come alive and start moving. In one performance he had to be begged off the stake he was tied to, saying "I 'm happy being where I am, leave me alone." One of the teachers said to me "So in the end drama gives kids the kind of things they need, like a heart and courage in their real lives. This drama stuff is quite symbolic isn't it?"

When the IDEA Congress came to Brisbane we decided we were all going and so set about convincing eighteen sets of parents we could take their children away for ten days. We convinced

ourselves we could raise thirty thousand dollars (which we did without a cent of government or corporate sponsorship). We decided we could perform in the Brisbane Performing Arts Centre to a packed out audience. We decided that as a community of artists we could join our colleagues from Australia and the rest of the world.

Our play, *The Kiss*, became a story about one eyed purple people eaters, about witches and poisoned apples and about falling in love.

The day we left Auckland sixteen of the eighteen had never been on a plane. Only one had been out of New Zealand. For three of them it was the first time they had spent a night away from their parents, and for me it was the highlight of my working life. I sat next to Daina and as we took off she asked me if I could hold her hand, not because she was scared of course, but because she was excited.

At our final rehearsals in Brisbane, Helen, who plays the part of the princess who eats the poisoned apple and falls asleep, asks me what would happen if she eats the apple and it doesn't work. I assured her that it definitely would work and prayed that I wasn't wrong. The standing ovation at the end of the show made me feel that drama could become the bridge between the marginalised and the mainstream, that drama could perhaps after all act as an agent for social change

The next day I was walking along the beautiful Brisbane River back to our hotel. I ran into a distinguished participant at the conference who hadn't been to the show the night before. We fell into step and for ten minutes walked along talking about our different drama projects. Just short of our hotel three of our students and their teachers came up to me, beaming, still full of the last night's performance. Suddenly the awkwardness or embarrassment of being around kids who drooled and made loud noises was too much for my drama colleague. Barely staying long enough to say "I'll catch you later Peter" he scurried off into the distance. There is nothing like a dose of reality to bring you back to earth about the power of drama. However, such an incident simply added enough contrast to our experience to in fact burnish it, rather than detract from it.

We left Brisbane enormously energised about being part of the international drama community. I was enormously proud of how the Congress had made space for our group. I felt good about the work we had done.

In terms of the simple things I want drama to do, my six years with the Pegasus Players that ended the night we left Brisbane had been successful. We had shared our stories with each other and the world had listened too. We had found shared meanings from our experience. We had created our own aesthetic language to explore issues that were important to us. We'd had some great belly laughs. I don't know how much social change occurred. I know I was changed forever from the experience and I trust for the better.

## References

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