

The Shape of Things to Come

Hi All,

During the most recent school holidays I took a trip to the Old Dart.

I arrived on a beautiful sunny morning in London and by mid-afternoon I was on a guided tour of the reconstructed Globe Theatre and marvelling at the impressive (and I'm told the world's largest) exhibition about William Shakespeare and his works. The display is housed in a building adjacent to the Globe and offers the visitor hours of intriguing exploration through the myriad of static and interactive displays. I took the tour and learned how the original Globe burned down; how the "penny stinkards" or "groundlings" used to make performances at the Globe a truly sensory experience; how it was reconstructed by the efforts of Sam Wanamaker and thousands of benevolent souls around the planet; needless to say I had a hoot and am looking forward to my next visit when I can stand amongst the modern 'groundlings' clutching my £5 ticket along with the other cheapskates of Cheapside.

After the tour I was lucky enough to meet with Fiona Banks who operates the educational division of the Globe through the GlobeLink program. The program offers teachers and students a range of activities including practical workshops, performances and visits to the Globe. For the Antipodean, we can also participate in international activities such as the *Adopt and Actor* scheme, where students can correspond with working actors from the company. If that's piqued your interest you can learn more at the Globe website: <http://shakespeares-globe.org/education/>

Well, England is a long way to go just to look at a theatre, even if it is one of the best known in theatre history, the main reason I took flight was to attend the UK National Drama conference from May 16 - 20. The theme of the conference was "The Shape of Things to Come" and its focus was on the future of Drama and Education. The conference was held in the beautiful walled city of York on the campus of the University College of Ripon and York, St John. At the outset I want to say what a brilliantly organised event it was and give all kudos to the organisers, especially Jan MacDonald, Pamela Bowell, Gabriela Lerner and Chris Lawrence, who all assisted me during my preparations and once I arrived. I was pleased to discover when I arrived that my £325 registration fee included individual accommodation, all meals, cabaret, performances, workshops and membership to National Drama. Needless to say I did extend my bill a little in the bar each evening – *only in the interests of serious and meaningful exchanges of opinion on Drama!*

Upon arrival I began bumping into old friends and colleagues from other Drama conferences and caught glimpses of people I recognised from their photographs in journals and dust-jackets of books. I checked in and was provided with a personalised itinerary of events for the five days and encouraged to mingle with others over complimentary tea and coffee. I discovered that I was the only Western Australian delegate, but not the only Australian. I was delighted to catch up with those ever-amiable globetrotters **Kate Donelan** and **Heather Smiegel**. We learned also that

Kate Collier (a lecturer in Adult Education) was also there from NSW. We were free until early evening when most of the 200+ delegates from 25 countries gathered for a wine reception before dinner. After dinner the work began and I attended the first of my ongoing workshops with **Jonothan Neelands**. Other practitioners running ongoing workshops included **Christopher (C.J.) Adhiambo** and **Kennedy Chinyowa**, **Ruth Burgess**, **Beng Santos-Carbangon**, **John Rainer** and **Patrice Baldwin**.

Jonothan saw the state we were in and decided it might be useful to get to know each other a little and we learned some new games to introduce ourselves and break the ice. Jonothan outlined his intentions for the workshops and we left for the Bar to continue getting to know each other. Jonothan's sessions provided us with some understanding of a conceptual framework he has been developing to consider the "*behavioural frames that teachers and students work within in drama*" (Neelands, 2000)¹. Over the next few days we explored the ideas through a series of practical Drama activities and discussions.

The next day after breakfast – I'll need to limit the food references, despite them being a significant part of the conference – we assembled to hear the first keynote address by Drama's "philosopher in residence" **David Best**. David talked about "Vision", he challenged us to consider why we are doing Drama, he asked us to consider attitudes towards the "scientism" that seems to be entering the world of educational assessment, he asked us to think about the differences between assessing, evaluating and measuring in Drama education. How does one *measure* the full extent of learning in Drama, can we even articulate all the learning that occurs let alone measure it? He asserted that "*sensitive informed judgement is the foundation of education*" (Best, 2000)² and that many seeking scientific validation undervalue a teacher's professional judgement. During his talk he made several references to Howard Gardner's work with Multiple Intelligences in relation to "scientism" – which I took to mean some form of academic error in overstepping the realms of legitimate scientific enquiry. My own opinion is that David ran the risk of alienating his audience and throwing the baby out with the bath water. Gardner's work has, to my mind, significant merit in the way it leads us to think about human behaviour, the *science* may have flaws but the **humanity** is perfectly intact.

The conference continued on that first day with morning tea and individual sessions – I attended a workshop presented by **Jim Schaefer** and **Ron Dodson** from Canada that taught me an interesting way to introduce script writing in to Drama classes. At the same time it combines introducing the roles of actor and director and could be well used as a starting point for original drama requirements in upper school Drama.

Akhram Khan, a dancer of traditional Indian dance forms and a contemporary dancer/choreographer later treated us to a performance. And after dinner we were invited to attend a performance from theatre in education company, **Vita Nova**. The performance called *Scratchin' the Surface* employed recovering drug users as actors and explored the pathway to self-destructive behaviour through drug involvement.

¹ Neelands, J. *In the hands of living people* in *Drama Research: The Research Journal of National Drama* (Chris Lawrence, Editor), Volume 1, Number 1. National Drama, London, 2000.

² Best, D. *Vision* in *Drama Research: The Research Journal of National Drama* (Chris Lawrence, Editor), Volume 1, Number 1. National Drama, London, 2000

My personal opinion is that this performance was very useful for the participants but less so for the attending delegates. It was apparently well received by schools in the UK and the curiosity value of meeting the cast may have added to its significance for young people. Do I need to point out the irony of the assemblage then retiring to the bar??

The next morning the venue was abuzz as delegates crammed into the main hall for the next keynote address by everyone's nanna, **Dorothy Heathcote**. Dorothy, whom I was lucky enough to chat with over tea later, offered us 4 models for active learning and regaled us with stories from her own experience that reflected her discussion. It was during this talk that I came to realise that in Dorothy Heathcote we do not really meet a Drama teacher, but a universal teacher. Many teachers of Drama and Drama Studies in upper school might be hard pressed to see the relevance of her work. My suspicion is that the average primary- or middle-school teacher would see it as a reasonable proposition for meeting the demands of an integrated curriculum.

The delegate sessions I attended this day were not surprisingly to those who know me "*Birmingham Squared – using drama on the net*" presented by **Steve Ball** (*Catalyst Theatre*) and **Ann Parouty** (*emote*). The presentation was hindered by technological hitches but we learned about a project where 4 schools around the globe interacted via a purpose built website, the ensuing discussion was fast and furious and it was easy to see technophobia intrude into the discussion. The point to be made I think is that it is too early in the game to decide whether we should or should not incorporate technology in Drama. My opinion is that we should simply be playing with it to see what it might offer. Ignorance is a poor excuse for not exploring and the discussion seemed to eventually bear out the point that while teachers may have concerns, students are infinitely more comfortable with the technology and are using it in ways that most leaves many teachers scratching their heads. That was followed by a session with **Pamela Bowell** and **Brian Heap** as they continued to share their developmental work in planning for learning through process drama. In the age of TEE drama it seems that we have forsaken process drama to some extent and this session reminded me of how and when it can be useful at all levels of Drama and other education. **Beng Santos-Carbangon** gave that afternoon's keynote address and explored and explained the work done by her organisation **PETA** (Phillipine Educational Theatre Association) in the Phillipines. Later that evening, after dinner, we were privileged to participate in a storytelling session by **Paul Jackson**, who told funny, poignant and enigmatic stories to the delight of everyone there.

Wednesday kicked off with delegate papers and workshops and this time I went to **John Norman's** session on "*Brain Right Drama*", interestingly this session focussed on research in neuroscience and the possibilities of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) in drama education. As a Master Practitioner of NLP and a co-presenter with **Beryl Chalk** of conference sessions on Brain Theory and Multiple Intelligences, I was eagerly looking forward to this session. Surprisingly I discovered that Beryl and I have been presenting similar work at conferences in Western Australia for the past few years. I was further surprised to discover that our work with teachers has already moved beyond what the delegates in the session were expecting to learn.

Gavin Bolton was next on the keynote agenda and he told us "*It's all theatre*". Those teachers who remember the great Hornbrook/Bolton debate that ensued for several

years will be surprised to read this apparent turn-around. It was not so much an about face as an attempt to reconcile the rift that occurred in Drama education. Gavin asked us to remember that many cultures have only one word for the practice of what we have divided into Theatre and Drama – Italian, for instance, has *teatro*, the same term for all manifestations of our practice. Gavin encouraged us to think of all that we do as “theatre” and accept that there are different reasons and strategies inherent in all manifestations of the practice. My belief is that many teachers have already decided that, but I think it a significant gesture to have this stated outright at such a prestigious gathering of practitioners. Ironically, the performance later that evening was “*Gobsmacked*” (as I think several delegates were by Gavin’s address), a theatre-in-education piece about domestic violence. That evening was the one of the highlights(?) of the conference, the birthday dinner and Cabaret... which saw many big names demonstrate just why they are teaching and not acting, and others left us wondering why they didn’t have recording contracts. It was great fun to see the less serious side of many practitioners and the added lubrication of hops and malt saw Thursday get off to a very subdued start.

Thursday, the last day of the conference, saw an excited Jonathan Neelands leave his proposed talk to be read in the Drama Research journal and tackle the more pressing issue of the status of Drama in the British education system. I think it was an important reminder that the role of Drama in education is by no means secure, and that the current trends in quantifying learning and teaching practice offer challenges to Drama educators to ensure that our subject is not overlooked and dismissed by the powers that be. The plenary took the form of a feedback session where delegates contributed suggestions for future conferences and the ongoing activities of National Drama.

Lunch on that final day was a chance for farewells and exchange of contact details before we each handed our keys to the porter and went on to the next destination in our lives. I was exhausted by the relentless activity of the conference and was looking forward to some time to reflect and digest... I was also sad to say goodbye to old and newfound friends and surprisingly, I was really looking forward to getting back to a drama class to apply what I’d learned. Over the past few days I had been invited to participate in some international projects and have been asked to be a leader in a Special Interest Group on Technology at the IDEA World Congress in Norway next year. Personally and professionally this was a fantastic experience – I can only encourage Western Australian teachers to seek out these opportunities – sure it costs time and money but it is an investment in professional, personal and social development. The next National Drama Conference is to be held in Edinburgh in 2002, I hope to see you all there. To stay in touch with the activities of National Drama you can visit their website at <http://www.nationaldrama.co.uk/>

Also remember the 4th IDEA World Congress in Norway in 2001 check the details at <http://www.idea2001.cc/>