

Putting on a Class Play with Children

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The children must be introduced to the play long before rehearsals are scheduled. e.g. if you are doing a play about Robin Hood in the 3rd term, then in the first term you need to introduce:

- the background to the stories of Robin Hood, giving a historical picture of the times the stories took place and the prevailing themes or issues;
- the characters - depicting them as fully as you can, bringing them to life;
- the story;
- do improvisations from critical moments in the story - e.g. Robin meeting Little John on the log crossing the river - ask children to improvise dialogue and actions;
- set writing exercises around key moments in the play: e.g. get them to write a letter such as Robin Hood would have written to Maid Marion saying what he thinks of Little John;
- Lots of language exercises, e.g. design a proclamation that the Sheriff of Nottingham might have made to be put up everywhere outlawing certain behaviours and which might trigger men leaving to join Robin Hood.

The point is for the whole class to be introduced to the whole play – story – without actually knowing they are going to do it as a play and without knowing which part they will take.

This work could be done in regular English classes, so long as it involves lots of language work, speaking spontaneously and which asks them to think about the play and the characters and to understand the main themes.

After some time when you pick up the play to begin work, you once again go through this stage but more quickly - overview, characters, story in a scene by scene way.

Then the teacher **MUST SPEAK THE WHOLE PLAY FOR THE CLASS!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!**

This is so essential - that it should be a law! The children must not see the play, they must not read it for themselves, they must **HEAR IT FOR THE FIRST TIME.**

Steiner even insists that at lower class levels the class teacher knows every word of the play. Why is this? Because children speak the way the words are arranged on the page, so if they read it for themselves, they often give the speeches strange inflections or flow or pronunciation. Once they have said the line - they tend to always say it the same way, so it is essential that they hear it said in the best way that the teacher can manage.

This reading can be taken in small bouts - one scene at a time with some discussion or games following. But at no time does the teacher let on any of the casting - it must remain a secret. However, I often ask the children to write me letters if there is a part they really would like. This often does not change my mind, but it can be revealing and helpful if you have some questions around casting.

Then the whole class reads the play one scene at a time. You ask them to sit in a circle, when it is their turn to read, (just read around the circle, each person reading the next speech, do not have children take parts!)

Ask them to speak loudly, clearly and slowly without rushing to drama. The main point of all this work is to get to know the play without fixing it. Children who read well, or who think they are good actors will often read fast, rush to conclusions about what is happening or who the characters are and miss deepening their understanding.

Only when the whole play has been read through in this way do you cast the play.

I do a big build up to this - drum roll, make them wait till an auspicious moment. Because this marks a huge stage in putting on a play. The whole project moves on from being the **WHOLE** play, which we all consider, into **PARTS**, for when you cast it, it is as though the play shatters into pieces and each child picks up a piece.

It is also essential that you prep children to understand that there is no such thing as a big part or a little part - that this stage is like life: we all must take a part and we are all important, and one of the most important things children (and their

teacher) discover in doing a play is that we need each other more than we know! we simply cannot do the play if one person fails!

Once the play is cast - the speaking in parts rehearsing begins. If you read any 'direction' courses they always tell you to begin with blocking - staging - Rudolf Steiner did not!

He suggests that the play is above our heads - in the realm of cosmic word - and we are in the process of bringing it to earth. This process is a downward one, beginning with the words, progressing to gestures and ending with staging and prop handling etc.

So the first stage is working on the words. This is the most important part of a play - if you look at Shakespeare you will see a singular thing - there are almost no directions!!!!!! The play is in the words.

The best way for children to learn words is not by reading but by hearing, so I establish a Buddy for each child and I work one-on-one with each child. Set the language in a clear healthy place, full of breath, coming out into the room, full of enthusiasm and form and you are 99% of the way towards having a play.

I arrange the children loosely where they might be on stage and help them to get their lines all the way out. The next trick is to know where the lines fit in the play – so weaving the play into a new form, made up from the lines which each student now “owns”, is the next stage.

When the lines are in – and becoming automatic – then you introduce gestures. Try to find out what the character is doing with their hands to emphasise their speech. It is important for all teachers to have lessons with Steiner's 6 basic gestures for stage - too hard to be described here.

When lines and gestures are flowing, then you can move the play. It is astounding how easy this is when the other parts are learned.

The other hugely important thing is the way characters relate to each other on stage. Many people make the mistake of directing a play as if it were a natural event, or the same way as screen acting is done. This is quite wrong.

The play is not done for the players themselves, but for the audience, so the teacher must learn to look at the play from the audience's point of view

and direct it from there. The actors must look to the audience for the bulk of their performing. See for yourself how important it is to you to see the mouth of the speaker or singer when you are in the audience. There is no reason EVER for an actor to speak to the back of the stage!!!!!!

Remember - that when you and your class perform this play - it has never been seen before - you found the script, you learned it, you cast it, but when you all put it together it is now completely new, fresh, created by you and as such it is an entirely new creation being given to the earth.

Lastly, never forget that the nature of the performing arts is that it is always happening in the NOW. The audience pays money to go and see people in the act of creation! They are working and people come to watch that work as it takes place. It is a marvellous thing. If we go to a gallery, we go to see the work that an artist has done, if we go to the theatre we go to see the artist in the act of creating, we participate in that creation and add to it by our response.

Lastly - and it is beating an old drum now - remember always that the purpose of all aspects of theatre is to increase the repertoire of responses for both the actors and the audience. You want the actors to respond to each other, and indeed to their own creation; and we want to allow the audience time to respond. All good reasons for not rushing on.

The main task of all this work is to increase our **ABILITY TO RESPOND** to life.

Good luck. If you have a chance, ask a speech and drama teacher to give you all short courses on this vital and fabulous art. ♦

Robyn Hewetson is a New Zealander who qualified as a state school teacher before training at Emerson College in Steiner Education. After working with a class in England, she went on to do the 4 year speech and drama training in London School of Speech Formation with Maisie Jones followed by 21 years in America including work in Steiner Schools and in corporations teaching speech to business people.

Back in NZ she teaches at Taruna College on a variety of courses, works with adults with disabilities at Hohepa Homes and has a business called 'WELL-SPOKEN'. Robyn also gives creative speaking, poetry and presentation skills classes to corporations, groups and individuals.