

Learning More Than You Know in Youth Drama

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This contribution to Youth Drama Ireland came about through the conversations that twenty-one youth theatre members hailing from around the country had with Shirley Brice Heath during a January weekend in Dublin. Shirley, a linguistic anthropologist who has studied young people working in community arts in locations around the world, came to Dublin both to learn about youth drama in Ireland and address a Critical Voices event co-hosted by NAYD and the National Youth Arts Programme (NYCI) with support from The Arts Council. During a Saturday morning workshop facilitated by Anna Galligan, NAYD's Development Officer, she introduced to the youth theatre members some key findings from her research. She then invited them to create tableaux or scenes to illustrate their experiences with these findings. That afternoon, for two hours, the young people and Shirley demonstrated to a capacity audience of artists, educators, policymakers, and funders just how young people learn "more than they know" through their work in youth drama. What follows is then a jointly authored contribution blending Shirley's words with those of the youth theatre members.

Whenever I am asked about what a linguistic anthropologist does, I answer "all the things that most of us with a spirit of adventure and a keen curiosity would like to do!" I then explain that my work takes me to parts of the world where I can learn from and with young people who spend a considerable amount of their time learning beyond the direct instruction of teachers or parents or other institutional representatives. My role as linguistic anthropologist brought me to Dublin in January of 2004 to spend a weekend with young members from youth drama programmes all over Ireland. I introduced them to some of the findings on language from my studies of youth arts organizations over the past two decades. In a Saturday morning workshop, we talked about the following research findings that tell us something about how young people talk and think while they are creating dance, visual arts, media arts, drama, or spoken word poetry.

Hypothetical propositions: Statements such as *if we start that scene at this point, then we will need to rework the entry of that character* reflect the imagined future world in which young people work within preparations for a dramatic production. Young people creating with the arts ask continually *What if? What about? Is that going to work if.....?*

Modals or verbs of possibility: These verbs are those that indicate the combination of will, intention, motivation, and a future outcome. Young people working within the theatre pepper their talk with phrases such as: *we might not get the full hour for the performance; you could try lighting only the door at*

the opening of that scene; we will need to get there before 3pm. These verbs show that speakers "see" within their heads possibilities and put themselves and their young colleagues into action as they plan ahead toward performance, production, or exhibition.

Complex conceptual frames, such as part-to-whole relationships: No piece of theatre works as a whole until all the parts begin to come together. This means not only the lines, gestures, and interactions of actors, but also lighting, promotion and publicity, travel and space plans, and many other elements. Working within the world of the arts of collaborative creation, where no one is allowed to focus for too long on only one small element, draws young people into understanding the interdependence of pieces and parts to a unified whole.

Stories for memory and mentoring: Work within youth theatre encourages stepping outside one's own narrow world of experience. In doing so, through text, production schedule, or critique, young people collect stories they can call on to help monitor their own attitudes and behaviors. But they also acquire stories – often of failures of products or performances that did not go as expected – they can share with newcomers to youth arts. The lore of youth drama – and indeed of all youth arts – builds a body of shared experience that encourages a sense of belonging to a professional group.

After only a brief introduction to "the world of research," the young members of youth drama made these dry research findings come alive in flesh, tears, smiles, gesture, and words. They not only illustrated the above four findings, but they also drew from their shared experience to speak out on critical issues that affect youth drama around the world. Questions from the audience after the seminar we jointly created and presented challenged the merits of youth theatre, its purposes and its right to any aesthetic claims.

To questions hinting that youth theatre lacks legitimacy, aesthetic merit, or general interest, the young people responded energetically. They flatly rejected any suggestion that youth theatre should be pedantic, moralistic, and grounded in the direct experience of young actors.

If you want to find out the most about yourself, you go to the place that's nothing like yourself. I'm directing a show, a devised show, and it was set in 1920. It's all about tango, and there was so much Dublin in it. [And] there was so much of ourselves in it. There were so many issues that are up to us and what our director said to us was: "if you want to find out the very most about yourself, go to a place that's completely unlike you." So he took us there. [Samantha Carpenter, Dublin Youth Theatre]

When you're working in a group, when you're working on characters, you explore the characters, you explore yourself as well. By playing other characters, you're exploring parts of yourself that you would never have even thought of before [or even knew] existed. [Jean Power, Wexford Youth Theatre]

Youth theatre members re-voice ideas that the anthropologist Margaret Mead put forward in the late 1960s. In the future, it would be the young who would

carry more and more socialisation responsibilities for society, for they would acquire more and sense more than their parents could. Mead referred to this state as "pre-figurative" cultural learning.

Teenagers now are a lot more mature, have more emotional baggage, can deal with more, have dealt with more, and they're in a deeper place to where their parents were at their age. [Ciarán Smith, Youthopia Theatre Company]

But youth theatre members do not justify what they do merely on their assessments of themselves. They call on long-standing ways of working and learning in the theatre:

[Ciarán goes on to say following the above point] *To be an actor, you don't necessarily have to draw on life experience.... That's the point of acting—to try to find one little thing to relate to, then build the character in. It's what actors should try to do. So why does [what we do in youth theatre] have to be about you? [It doesn't!] You can get them all play 67 year olds. The suspension of disbelief would be there if they're all playing 67 year olds!*

Perhaps most essential to the work of young artists is their sense of themselves in a long line of professionals. In Ireland, in particular, youth theatre is well-acknowledged as a critical training ground for future actors, lighting artists, set designers, and arts producers and directors.

You have to start somewhere, even if it is just an hour after school one day doing a drama class, and then it goes on to youth theatre.... We learn how to direct, set design, write, we learn how characters can be staged... we have a better all-round view of things as opposed to people who go straight into acting. So we are more likely to be able to see things from the other person's point of view – from the position of director, stage-manager, etc. [Jean Power, Wexford Youth Theatre]

Fundamentally, youth theatre members know that work in the theatre stretches their thinking, language, ways of being, and pushes learning across numerous domains of expertise. Words and phrases such as *build*, *learn*, *listen*, and *break barriers* come through when members explain what happens for them within youth theatre. But they also move beyond these simple positives to lay out the complexities of their work and the drawing power of **risk** within theatre. Many point out their own willingness to explore theatre for the most challenging opportunities it presents:

I co-directed a play in my youth theatre. I wanted to be in this play as well, because to see something from being in it and directing at the same time brings your views together in ways that are very different from being only an actor. [Oonagh Lehmann, Cabinteely Youth Theatre]

The last piece we did, I was stage manager and I had a voice-over role as well. It is kind of weird seeing a play done from the production point of view and also actually having a part. [Niamh Carey, Mountmellick Youth Theatre, Laois]

The argument is often made that if there were sufficient research to make the

claim that youth arts "means something," "adds up to *real* learning," or "gives an academic boost," funding and support would follow. Overlooked is the fact that such research findings do exist – both within academic journals and popular media outlets. However, the support of a society and its policymakers for youth arts will not come until young people – one by one, as a group, and as critical voices – find respect from their elders. Anthropologist Margaret Mead said to us "it will be the child – and not the parent and grandparent – that represents what is to come" (*Culture and Commitment*, 1970, page 68). If we have no respect for the young and the ways they choose to work to learn, and the organisational contexts, such as youth theatre, they support, we stand to have little sustained benefit from what is to come. The young who hold up youth theatre to tell and show us its learning powers ask only that we listen, look, consider, and thereby help them both build and critique the future.

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