Play Making in the School Group; The Use of Pantomime in Developing Acting Techniques

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Play-making in the School Group
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Current Notes about Children Curriculum and Research for Teachers and Parents

Cooperative School for Student Teachers
Harriet Johnson Nursery School
Bureau of Educational Experiments

69 Bank Street, New York City
"The play's the thing" more because of the human experience that lies back of it than for itself in its own right. At least this may be said of the play that grows through the school experience and takes form in the school life. In a measure, I think it may also be true in the drama of the adult world. If a play is really significant in any period of history, it is based on forces, urges and feelings that reach deep down into the very soil on which the group exists. The playwright is a channel through which the deeper experiences come through in dramatic form. I would venture to say that in periods of history when social forces were in important stages of evolution drama was always functional, either in expressing and clarifying the great conflicts present or in unifying the group through a sharing of emotions.

In primitive tribal life, man felt Nature pitted against him. Drama was a direct simple expression of experience with Nature. Security came through their grouping themselves together. Dance and ritual grew out of the phantasy that they might become one with or gain control over Nature. Greek plays imply a highly civilized reflective attitude toward life. Drama was recognition again that there are forces in the world of man greater than man - Oedipus against his own fate. The Greeks must have grimly enjoyed seeing so ordered a life work itself out in the play before them. In the Elizabethan period, which was one of exploration of land and ideas new and old, we see a widening of human experience and a widening of content - a life lived with gusto. Audiences must surely have delighted in seeing a life so enriched, so experimental, so inclusive, brought to them in dramatic form.

On Broadway today I took a hasty view of types and kinds of plays as they are listed for the coming week. Criticizing as a layman, I found sixty per cent are for the entertainment of the audience, with plots ranging from any trivial or hackneyed theme on to pure spectacular or vaudevillean amusement. Fifteen per cent of the plays are revivals - "L'Aiglon," "Romeo and Juliet," etc. Fifteen per cent have been bodily brought over from Europe - English and Irish plays. Approximately ten per cent express some significant outgrowth in American life and try to deal with important factors today. These are plays such as "Gold Eagle Guy," "Tobacco Road," "Stevedore," etc., and the list would include plays by Eugene O'Neill, Elmer Rice and other modern playwrights. Without intent to condemn the other plays for form and entertainment, it appears that, by and large, the American stage is turned over to the passing purpose of amusing large audiences, and doing so without interpreting to them forces that are boiling up all around them.
And so again, in school dramatics, "the play's the thing" when it is the outgrowth of a tremendous experience on the children's own level. Since we, as teachers, control the environment, we can try to bring into the children's lives the activities, experimentation and rich content which they may need. In so far as the content of the experience is vividly absorbed and reaches almost a saturation point where the children can make emotional identification of themselves with the people of other times or places or whatever situation they are dealing with, to that extent a play of their creation is of them significant drama. The play evolves and, in itself, becomes a great integrating force in drawing together their separate experiences as they build their own plot, costume themselves, paint their own scenery and incorporate music, dance or other arts into their dramatic form.

Much might be said about the teacher's share in bringing about an experience that leads to such plays, but I would rather illustrate with a quotation or two from the experience of the twelve-year-old children who were running the lunch room for the school and in connection undertook to investigate the production and distribution of food in America. The play itself grew out of the content of many group discussions and reports of trips. The following is part of the teacher's record:

"We went to see how the food supplies are handled in New York. The girls went into a refrigerator car which had been ferried across the Hudson, examined the fruit and found out from where it had been shipped. Then they saw it auctioned. They understood that the bidders were middlemen from the metropolitan area, jobbers, wholesalers or buyers for big hotels and steamship lines. The girls were interested by the speed with which the men indicated their bids, with just a nod or the flash of a finger.

"Then we followed the fruit and vegetables to the Washington wholesale market, from which trucks of food went out to small commission men or directly to retailers. We also saw the large city-owned retail market in which dealers rent individual stalls. It was beautifully kept and offered many rare foods for sale.

"A complete contrast to this very high-class market was the pushcart neighborhood. We drove through many streets in the lower East Side and finally stopped on Orchard Street. It was very crowded and had several blocks of carts from which food, clothing and household articles were being sold. The girls were left free to wander up and down, to talk to the people, etc. Nearly every girl bought something or tried bargaining. The girls could identify themselves with the salesman because they saw what his stock was and what he had to do, and it was easy to see why things should be cheaper when sold from pushcarts. We stayed about an hour and learned from the Commissioner about the licensing system.

"Later we made trips into the country to see truck-farms and dairy-farms.

"When the play was under way, Barbara was absorbed in her part as the farmer. At first she did not do the hurdy-gurdy man well, and
we talked of trying another person for the part. Barbara said, 'Well, you know it's terribly hard to get out of that farmer part and be a jolly hurdy-gurdy man so quickly.'

"Towards the end the group became self-conscious about their play. I am sure it was because they were afraid everyone would not understand it. But all along in working it out they were very much in it, and finally in presenting it, the response from the others brought back their former enthusiasm. I believe they got a great deal from the experience.

"When we were planning the final presentation I wanted to explain the situation by means of a little introduction on the program, but the group was determined to have a classroom scene in the play, so each wrote her suggestions for a dialogue for the opening. The following was one of several rather similar discussions which they gave me. (It is understood that Virginia has just finished a report on truck-farming and the group is discussing it. Perry is the teacher):

Angela: But, Perry, why don't they distribute the food better?
Barbara: Why does the farmer get so little and why do we have to pay so much?
Perry: One at a time, girls, one at a time.
Virginia: Well, as I said before, why do we have to pay so much?
Perry: That is the greatest problem in modern food distribution. There are so many middlemen, people in between, who have to make some money before it gets to us, the consumers.
Catherine: But why do they have middlemen or whatever you call them?
Perry: Why don't they get rid of them?
Virginia: Because they can't get the vegetables, fruit, etc., to us without the people in between. The farmer can't ship the food to us.
Barbara: Well, heavens, I should think they'd do something about it. The poor farmer should get more for his crops.
Perry: That's just it. He gets hardly enough to pay for the seeds, still less to get clothes and things he needs. Why, he can just barely pay his tax on the land.
Tottie: But there must be some way to change it. It's all wrong and not at all fair.
Catherine: The vegetables are rotting by the road because the farmer gets so little for what he sells and so much is left over. Over-production! And in the cities there are people who are starving for want of fresh food.
Virginia: Oh, Perry, it's time for lunch. We're five minutes late. Hurry! Let's go quick."

Their play was called "Exit the Middleman." The introductory scene was made up of lines picked from a number of such dialogues, and from that point the play became a phantasy. Tottie falls asleep as the class goes out to rhythms, and then dreams of herself in various situations. First she sees the farmer at work and hears the talk of the farmer and his boys on their troubles - weather, lack of machinery, low prices. Some by-play comes in with the wife and daughters, and then the "middleman" appears and Tottie becomes very much excited in her dream because she is trying to
help the farmer, who is being taken in by the middleman and undercut in his prices. When he offers seventy cents a bushel for the fresh vegetables, Tottie calls out, "Why, he's a cheat. We pay two and a half dollars a bushel at school. No wonder we pay high prices and the farmer gets nothing or next to nothing! Follow him to the city and you'll see!" As in any dream, she is powerless and the scene ends as the farmer's products are loaded and taken away.

The next scene is an East Side pushcart neighborhood in New York. Noises of the city streets are heard and many characters pass up and down, some selling and some buying. The hurdy-gurdy man comes through, newsboys shout, etc. Here, again, Tottie becomes eyewitness to the difficulties of the consumer and tries again to break into the scene to help the people and advise them to go and connect with the farmer, but cannot make herself heard in the street life going on all around her. Finally, the middleman and the farmer both appear and the ending of the play is a joint revolt of the consumer and the farmer against the middleman, ending in chasing him completely from the scene. The music of the rhythms class is heard and one of the children comes and wakens Tottie, who is surprised to find the farmer, the pushcarts and the middleman gone. She goes off to join her group.

Many plays have been produced in the school which perhaps were better from a play-making point of view, but this was interesting because it represented so genuinely a deep experience on the part of the children with some important phases of life in the adult world, the content of which came to them in connection with actual practical uses in their management of the school lunch room. Through buying for the school kitchen, the children went back in their thinking to factors which brought about the prices of food. They truly grasped the farmer's problem, and this gave them new understanding and new attitudes.

The content became clarified through presenting it to the rest of the school. The play was the type that sets forth important issues and shows the desire for a solution. It implied an understanding that social living must evolve toward a better economic basis for both producer and consumer.

I recall criticizing the play from the point of view that there was a certain danger in the children's trying to represent the pushcart neighborhood and the life of the people there. Externally they put on a beautiful scene, colorful and moving, but I was afraid that their contact was not real in the way it was with the farmer and, therefore, questioned presenting these people in just a picturesque way. Their interest in the trip, however, and their discussion of it seemed genuine, and all experiences have to start with a contact and perhaps continue over many years before the kind of understanding develops that means an identification of self with others. At any rate it indicated a start in widening the horizon of the children toward other groups, and the play itself represented the experience of the group, expressed in their own form.
Transition from Dramatic Play

Children in the younger age groups use dramatic play for their own satisfaction to record and complete their experiences. Eight-year-olds are usually ready to give their material simple dramatic form and to plan to present it to others. They may easily be led to interest themselves in the problem of making their performance more intelligible and in presenting it more effectively. This article will describe the teacher's first steps in helping the group attack these problems. It will deal chiefly with pantomime, the foundation of all good acting. The exercises which are described have been used by groups from eight to twelve years old and their subject matter is taken for the most part from school programs used by children of these ages.

Preserving Pantomime in the Child's Acting

The eight-year-old child has ordinarily accumulated a fairly large vocabulary and, following the example of the adults about him, he has begun to depend chiefly on words as his means of communication. But because he has earlier used pantomime freely to supplement his inadequate means of expression, he can easily be brought to employ it again and to make it the basis of all his acting. To do so will tend to give his work vitality and genuineness, however simple it may be, and to save him from weak and barren performances which undertake to express meanings and define characterizations for the most part through properties and lines.

Almost any part of the action in a performance which the children are preparing may be selected for special work in pantomime. Activities requiring the use of big muscles will be the most fruitful in results because they will give the performers the experience of using their whole bodies - a necessity in all good acting, however restrained the bodily expression may be.

In a play by ten-year-olds based on Egyptian life, the teacher may choose the activities of slaves who are rowing a boat up the Nile. The group has agreed that the boatmen shall struggle with the current and the heavy rushes, and finally land on the muddy river bank after pulling their boat to shore. The children who row will probably move their wrists and hands very actively, but the muscles of their legs and backs and shoulders may show little evidence of the physical ordeal which they are undergoing, and the audience will not be made aware by their behavior of the slipperiness of the river-bed and the resistance of the reeds through which they are struggling.

Instead of describing their pantomime to the oarsmen, the teacher will begin by helping them to become more aware of the physical
qualities of the situation in which they are acting. One very effective way of doing so is by helping them to contrast their responses to these qualities with their behavior under conditions which are the opposite.

"Show me how you would row when the water is smooth and the boat is light."

The children will probably move their hands and wrists much as before.

"Now a wind comes up. The water is rough and the current is against you. You have to pull very hard! It feels very heavy."

The children will probably bend farther forward from the waist and pull their arms back toward them more slowly.

"Now you grow very tired. You decide you can land the boat and leave it. You try to get up, you are stiff and sore. Climb out and pull the boat farther aground. It is very heavy, you can hardly move it. All together now — some push and some pull. There it goes at last!"

Similarly the group may work on the business of landing in the mud and walking through the rushes to the shore.

"You are stepping from the boat upon hard smooth ground. Now you are barefoot in the desert, the sand is scorching hot. You are crossing a little stream in an open field, it feels pleasant to your feet. The cool slippery mud oozes through your toes.

"You are walking through a field. There is nothing in sight around you anywhere. Now you are in tall reeds, they make it hard to see and walk. You have to push them aside with your shoulders and hold them back with your hands. You can hardly see where you are going, they are so thick."

Pantomimes Emphasizing Responses to Sense Stimuli

After they have had some experience with these exercises the teacher may help the children to observe and try to improve their responses to a single sense stimulus occurring in the scene. The inexperienced actor is likely to skip the steps that will probably occur in such a response actually and which must occur in the actor's performance in order to make the situation clear and vivid for the audience. When a fearful apprentice of a mediaeval printer hears a sound at the door he must respond, first with his body, then with his eyes, and finally with his words, instead of merely saying his line, "I hear footsteps, Master."
To help him recognize and carry through each stage of his reaction in this part, the teacher may reconstruct the situation with him, a fragment at a time, while he acts.

"You are hurrying to get your work finished. Meanwhile you are listening and looking toward the door for fear someone will hear or see through the keyhole what you and the master are doing. You think you hear a step on the stairs outside. You stop work and listen, standing very still. No! It's a mistake. You go on working again. Now you do hear someone, and you hold your tools still. You gently lay them down and very softly go to the door and listen at the crack. Yes! Now you are sure, you turn quickly to your companion. 'Master, I hear footsteps.'"

Older children will enjoy discovering and verifying these steps by observing their own pantomime in the following exercises. The teacher will encourage them to use different kinds of sense stimuli for their responses.

"You are crossing a room. Something stops you. It is something you see or smell or hear or feel. We shall try to guess which. Show us how you will behave when it stops you, where it is, what it is and what you decide to do about it."

**Exercises in Pantomime Leading to One Line**

The action of the printer's apprentice described above is a simple illustration of the inexperienced actor's major difficulty, which has already been suggested, that of emphasizing lines and plot at the expense of pantomime and losing the opportunity to make lines effective by giving the action which leads up to them and makes them significant.

Exercises in pantomime preceding a significant line may give considerable help to children who are ready to be interested in improving their skills in dramatic work. The problem may be stated as follows:

"You will each choose one line from the list, and give a scene in pantomime which will lead up to it and end with it. What you do must prepare us for the line, and your way of saying it must be appropriate for the character you have shown in your pantomime."

Suggested lines are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Save one for me.</th>
<th>I never touched it</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There are six of them.</td>
<td>Shall I open it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oh, it's broken.</td>
<td>Be careful.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Each line may be used for several members of the class and the teacher may ask several of the more imaginative and capable performers to use the same line as the ending for two or three very different situations. She may suggest that the child use characters of different sexes or different ages or very different occupations in order to insure contrast. To do this will lead him inevitably to experiment in several types of characterization. And because the lines have considerable dramatic value, he will probably express emotion in his role.

Discussion of the performances will give the teacher an opportunity to bring up simple points in regard to characterization and the delivery of the line as well as the pantomime which the child has used in the scene. There may be discussion, for example, as to whether the characterization is consistent, whether the emotions are plausible and justified by what has happened, and whether the tone in which the line is delivered is appropriate for the feelings which have been displayed.

The Connection Exercise

It is one of the pitfalls of inexperienced actors to concentrate on their own lines and not to remain sensitive and aware of the behavior of their fellow-actors. They are likely, indeed, almost to cease to act entirely except when they are speaking. With older children the teacher may use the so-called connection exercise to help them with this problem in order to achieve genuine give-and-take between the performers. These exercises are constructed so that they require the actors to get the cues for their behavior from each other and therefore to attend to each other with the utmost concentration in order to carry on the performance at all. For example, a group who is studying Chinese life may take the following problem:

A master goldsmith comes home to his shop as an apprentice and two journeymen are eating their rice. The master may choose between two plans. Either he will come home with good news and a feeling of great pride in one of his employees, because he has heard that this man rescued a packet of merchandise from thieves at the wharf; or he will come in very angry because a piece of his porcelain has been seen in a rival's window and he knows that one of his boys must have stolen and sold it.

The teacher will give a secret direction to each employee,

"You are (or are not) the man about whom the master has heard good (or bad) news."

The problem for each member of the cast is to judge from the entrance of the employer which plot he has chosen and to act accordingly. The employee who has been made villain or hero will show shame and fear or pride and embarrassment. The other men will discover which of their number is guilty or brave and will react to him and to the situation in characteristic ways. The master must judge from the behavior of all three
which one is the thief or hero and behave toward each of them accordingly. Each actor must obviously be instantly aware of the behavior of all the others, since he has no guide for his actions other than their behavior and since each step of his performance must depend on what he learns from what has gone before.

The limits of this article will not permit adequate discussion of this last tool in teaching acting techniques and its use with younger and older groups. It is suggested, however, that the teacher experiment with it and with exercises in pantomime based on the material with which her group is working. She will almost certainly find that they will contribute to her product. If she grows skillful in their use, they will become an invaluable aid to her in laying foundations for good acting and in helping her group to keep its work at a high level.
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