

**THE 'THIRD THING':
RANCIÈRE, PROCESS DRAMA
AND EXPERIMENTAL
PERFORMANCE**

In 1996, the year RiDE started, I qualified as a secondary drama teacher. My training was focused on the process drama ideas of Peter Slade, Dorothy Heathcote, Gavin Bolton and Jonathan Neelands, and as someone who saw themselves as politically and socially committed, I believed passionately in this work. I felt it enabled students to begin to articulate who they were and what they believed in, whilst also enabling me to challenge them and to encourage them to find new perspectives on the world around them. However, I did not really go to see socially engaged theatre for pleasure. I loved experimental theatre. In my teaching I felt as if I was a chameleon, straddling a socially focused practice below A-level and an aesthetically focused practice at A-level. I knew that I was interested in the open ended nature of both processes, resisting as they did the “pedagogical climate” of 1996 which was “constructed by a conventional scientific paradigm which promotes outcomes, controls behaviour, and permits individual reflective turning within foreseen categories and codes” (Taylor 1996, 3), but I wasn’t sure if they were linked beyond this.

After 1996, this climate grew harsher for me and many other process drama teachers as Government curriculum reform after reform focused on theatre as plays rather than performance, and performance rather than process. Whilst companies I loved such as Complicite and Forced Entertainment were beginning to make an impact on the mainstream, I was reluctant to let go of the kind of inspirational work I knew I had seen students achieve through process drama. Yet my passion for it felt increasingly out of date.

I found a potential link to contemporary thinking, however, through the theory of Jacques Rancière. In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Rancière outlines the work of Joseph Jacotot, a French teacher who had to teach Flemish students who spoke no French the novel *Télémaque*. Jacotot’s own ignorance of Flemish meant that his ability to do this was limited, but he discovered that the students taught themselves a complex text in a foreign language because of their *will* to learn. He described their learning as “emancipation” from the normal hierarchies of education. Instead, a more egalitarian relationship was created where

students started to think for themselves (Rancière 1991, *passim*). Rancière is of course not alone in suggesting much education assimilates students into thinking in a prescribed way rather than for themselves. H. L. Mencken suggested in 1924 that schooling serves to “reduce as many individuals as possible to the same safe level, to breed and train a standardised citizenry, to put down dissent and originality” (cited in Gatto 2003 and O’Toole 2009, 37), and such ideas have also been taken up by Freire (1996) amongst others.

However, what resonated for me about Rancière’s article in relation to process drama was its vision of a pedagogical relationship based on mutual discovery. In both cases the teacher’s role is important. Her role is to “remind her students that they can *already* speak”, to be a “teacher who refuses her students the satisfaction of admitting that they are incapable of speaking” (Bingham and Biesta 2010, 154). What Rancière asserts here as needing to be at the centre of emancipatory educational praxis is work on the student’s will: “man is a will served by an intelligence” (51-2). The capacity for intelligence is already there, it is evident in human behaviour such as the learning of language, yet most education works on a relationship between teacher and student focused on the relationship of one intelligence to another intelligence. What if, Rancière asks, education was to focus on “a pure relationship of will to will?” (13). Education could then function as a microcosm of emancipation, with students working alongside teachers and teachers alongside students to understand, question and debate. Through this process students might gain a sense of self-worth and of their own potential power.

A focus on students having power in the learning process is also key to process drama. In 1954 Peter Slade stated, “The good teacher *suggests* only, and knows when something new is being added [by the student]. If this something is different from our own conception, leave it alone” (Slade 1954, 177). Betty Jane Wagner similarly states that Dorothy Heathcote “is a master at withholding her factual expertise [...] so the class goes on wondering” (Wagner 1979, 29). For Wagner, this approach is at least partly not only a journey towards new

knowledge. Rather, through the drama lesson “she will help students discover that they know more than they thought they knew” (228).

Such an approach has been criticised, most famously perhaps by David Hornbrook. For Hornbrook the drawing out of the *existing* beliefs of students rather than of drawing their attention to *new* styles, concepts and ideas meant that far from being an empowering methodology drama-in-education “denied itself access to culturally endowed systems of judgement, and thus to the means whereby this strictly local experience may be held up against other wisdoms” (Hornbrook 1998, 97). For Rancière, however, Jacotot’s pedagogy was not premised on an idealised notion of free expression. Rather, it was based around the “intelligence of the book [...which was] the thing in common, the egalitarian intellectual link between master and student” (Rancière 1991, 13).

Elsewhere Rancière describes this as the ‘third thing’: “In the logic of emancipation, between the ignorant schoolmaster and the emancipated novice there is always a *third thing* – a book or some other piece of writing – alien to both and to which they can refer to verify in common what the pupil has seen, what she says about it and what she thinks of it” (Rancière 2009a, 14-15, my emphasis). He suggests that this is not a vision of “the transmission of the artist’s knowledge or inspiration to the spectator. It is the third thing that is owned by no one, whose meaning is owned by no one, but which subsists between them” (Rancière 2009a, 14-15).

For Rancière, the ‘third thing’ of art (in this case a novel) can function as a vehicle for students’ development because it offers neither the perspective of the teacher nor the student. Art creates an emancipatory educational space for debate that moves beyond the “distribution of the sensible” (2004, *passim*) that underpins social life: “Aesthetic strangeness” cannot be fully colonised by the social, and this strangeness can “carry the promise of a new sensible world” (Rancière 2009b, 101). In this conception, Rancière is suggesting that art does not realise its potential radicalism when it strives to have a direct meaning: like James Thompson, he would agree that “interpretation, or finding meaning, is

too often aligned with forms of extraction, exploitation and ownership” (Thompson 2011, 182). Rather, art is most powerful when it allows a new relationship to be created in the moment of its enactment, with meaning being open to negotiation. And for drama and theatre, where the relationship between audience and artist is explicitly foregrounded in the shared time and space of the relationship between spectator and performer, such a conception is arguably particularly pertinent.

Similarly, the fictional context of process drama is what distinguishes it from conventional pedagogy, where students and teachers are both placed in a context of ‘real’ knowledge. Interestingly, the connection between process drama and Rancière’s ‘third thing’ is explicitly foregrounded in the Dorothy Heathcote example cited by Wagner above. Wagner states that after “withholding her factual expertise”, Heathcote contributes a Walt Whitman poem into the lesson, saying to the students “Perhaps it’s something you have to think about a little” (Wagner 1979, 29-30). As with Rancière’s description of Jacotot’s pedagogy, the open nature of the ‘third thing’ of art provides a focal point for learning premised on discovery, not the ‘transmission of knowledge’.

It is here that I begin to find a way of understanding how my love of both process drama and experimental theatre might make sense and offer me insights into how they might be fused in practice. In an earlier article, I outlined how the Chicago based company Goat Island developed a working process that allowed for a performance aesthetic which existed “outside the economy of everyday life” (Fryer 2010, 556). But through Rancière’s notion of the ‘third thing’ it is also possible to see performances by Goat Island and many other experimental practitioners as a *process* of mutual learning for both spectator and performer. According to Karen Christopher, a performer in Goat Island, their work was about trying to “pull spectators away from wherever they have been, mentally, during the day, and to bring them into this space, now” (cited in Bottoms and Goulish 2007, 51). The spectator is brought face to face with a new, artificial world being created from the fragments of the

process. The spectator then attempts to assimilate, or 'process', the 'third thing' of the performance and its process into their own world.

I'm mindful of the fact that Gavin Bolton similarly saw process drama and performance as interdependent concepts: citing Fleming, he suggests that "in an active discipline like drama every end product contains a process within it and every process is in some sense a product" (quoted in Davis 2010, 29). The creative processes of both process drama and experimental theatre might open up a subjective process, a reflection that the clearly defined pedagogic relationship or the clearly defined representative world cannot. And it ultimately exists only in its enactment in the present between the teacher and the student; between the spectator and the performance. Bottoms suggests, via Guattari, that experiencing Goat Island's work offers the spectator a "*detritorialization* of the mind – opening out time and headspace to facilitate a more personal intuitive *process* of response than is normally experienced" (Bottoms and Goulish 2007, 55, original emphasis). Through the lens of Rancière's theories, one might map these conceptions of artifice and deterritorialization onto the 'dissensual' articulation of a new territory within the individual spectator. In such a process, for Christopher and CJ Mitchell, "[t]he audience begins to hear itself" (quoted in Bottoms and Goulish 2007, 67), and in this 'hearing' a process of discovery is initiated.

Because this 'hearing' is processual, however, it does not only exist for the student and spectator but also for the teacher and the performer. Gavin Bolton states, when discussing process drama teaching, that "'living through' drama" was not just something for students but "became accepted by some as something *adults* successfully did together" (quoted in Davis 2010, 4, original emphasis). And Tim Etchells of Forced Entertainment states that there is a "need by groups like ourselves [...] to work out and work through and work against the landscape of our cities, our sexualities, and our selves" (Etchells 1994, 120-1). In both cases the making of the work is not only an expression of something to an audience but also an exploration of something for the artist. For Rancière's emancipated student and for his

emancipated spectator, but also for the emancipated teacher and artist, there is a process here of what Bottoms calls “unlearning” (Bottoms and Goulish 2007, 55): a subjective pedagogical process of valuing one’s own experiences whilst challenging what one thinks one knows, allowing what is taken for granted to be opened up anew.

When I find myself trying to teach students about anything, including drama in education or experimental theatre, I find Rancière’s writings function as a useful warning bell. Am I perpetuating the “distribution of the sensible”? Or am I seeing what’s happening between me and the students right now as part of a learning (and unlearning) process for all of us, something that even tangentially realises the idea of a “pure relationship of will to will”? The latter feels difficult to define, can challenge my own status within the hierarchy of much conventional pedagogy, and I can easily find myself becoming attracted to the former, with its more easily defined and quantifiable outcomes. I can plan for it, I know my status, and I know what’s required of me. My role is clearer, and although I may not always achieve it the quest for the stunning production, the impressive demonstration of skills, or the essay which demonstrates impressive academic knowledge provides me with clear intended outcomes, and the students with clear learning objectives. They also might all appear to help me make a tangible case for drama at a time when it is on the back foot. After all, in the UK it is absent as a discrete subject from the National Curriculum, and even the National Youth Theatre’s Chief Executive Paul Roseby has argued that it has “no relevance” as an independent GCSE subject (quoted in Snow 2014). According to Claire Bishop, seeking easily verifiable outcomes in the education process is also a logical outcome to the introduction of tuition fees in the UK for home undergraduate students of up to £9000 per annum, where education becomes “increasingly a financial investment, rather than a creative discovery; a career move, rather than a place of epistemological inquiry for its own sake” (Bishop 2012, 268-9). Indeed, according to the *Sunday Times* in June 2013, “Hundreds of university courses are being axed as students [...] increasingly choose

vocational courses that they think will give them the best chance of securing a job” (Griffiths and Lawson 2014, 15).

But something else is possible, I try to remind myself. What was understood by the process drama movement was how drama can be applied not despite but *because* it exists as an independent ‘third thing’ that functions as the fulcrum of a process of discovery. I’ve seen students grow as artists and as people because of a series of encounters with ‘third things’. I want to hold on to a more holistic sense of what drama and theatre are doing as a process in the classroom, the drama studio, even the lecture hall. But it slips from me again: it’s not *just* a process. It’s possible to see drama and theatre as being, to quote Laura Cull, “processes that may become more and less thing-like at any one time” (Cull 2012, 12). This thing is a third thing that can’t be easily quantified by artist, spectator, teacher or student. And I am trying to hold onto the slipperiness of this thing in a climate that wants me to be able to pin down what it is that I do and what it is.

For RiDE and the notion of applied theatre in its subtitle, this slipperiness is important. For applied theatre practitioners, Rancière’s theory of the third thing might also suggest that it is important to see our work not *only* as applied. Our exploration might lead to inconclusion, its application hard to pin down. It might sit beyond that which is easily quantifiable and remain tantalisingly out of reach for artist, spectator, teacher and student. Discovering what we don’t know might be a difficult goal to define, but it is an application that I would argue is at the heart of any progressive creative practice. It is part of a process of ongoing learning - and unlearning - for all involved. And I think it’s this that I have loved experiencing as a teacher and student in process drama, as an artist, and as a spectator of Goat Island, Forced Entertainment and other experimental companies over the last twenty years. And it’s why I hold on to the value of this subject, despite all the challenges it’s faced and continues to face.

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