



YOUTH DRAMA:  
THE 'YOUTH WORK ACT'?

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This pic: Roundabout Youth Theatre.



An important and influential book called *Youth Work*, published in 1987 and edited by Tony Jeffs and Mark Smith, set out to explore the multifaceted nature of youth work and the way in which the role of the youth worker draws on aspects of numerous other professions, occupations and pursuits. The title of each chapter begins with the words "Youth Workers as..." and then an additional word or term is inserted, including:

- social workers;
- educators;
- community workers;
- entrepreneurs;
- character builders;
- redcoats [referring to the entertainment staff at Butlins holiday camps].

It is probably immediately obvious to anyone with experience of youth work practice how a case could be made for seeing youth workers from each of these perspectives. The case for youth workers as educators is particularly strong, of course, and has been formally acknowledged as such by the definition in the Youth Work Act 2001; but there is no denying the link between (at least certain types of) youth work and social work, particularly in their historical development. Youth work and community work are integrally connected in theory and practice and are taught together within the same professional programmes in my own university. That youth workers need to be entrepreneurial, in the sense of being resourceful, strategic, risk-taking (within reason), and "enterprising" will probably be acknowledged by most people, particularly in the current economic climate (although most would also caution against the dangers of "privatising" youth work as has begun to happen in parts of Britain). The term "character building" has rather conservative and even oppressive connotations but in principle facilitating young people to build their characters need not be either of these things (and in fact the chapter in question argued for a "socialist alternative" to the traditional character building model). And since young people take part in youth work voluntarily, it needs to be sufficiently enjoyable to attract and sustain their interest and involvement, meaning that an element of entertainment is inevitable. There is nothing wrong with this: all good education should be fun as well as challenging.

But even in 1987 when I first read it I thought that there was another chapter that could have been included in the book, providing another perspective and called "Youth Workers as Actors". I have said as much many times over the years to the youth work students at NUI Maynooth, but have never got around to writing such a chapter myself (I haven't got my act together, so to speak). The invitation to contribute to *Youth Drama Ireland* was therefore very welcome because it prompted me to revisit the idea as well as to look more generally at youth drama and its value in the youth work context.

This is something in which I have a particular interest, not least because drama and youth work to a significant extent occupy a shared space in my own personal history. It was in my very early teens that I discovered both, and they have both remained very important to me ever since. My introduction to drama was partly through my involvement in youth work (as well as school); and there was certainly a substantial overlap – and an enormous

degree of complementarity – between what I gained from both. Like many young people I found the "role playing" of drama enormously liberating and empowering. After all, if the process of identity development is essentially about exploring answers to the question "who am I?" (and related questions such as "what are the possibilities for me?", "what kind of person *could* I be?"), then what better method could there be for undertaking such exploration (and what safer, and more "constructive" method in every sense) than engaging in collaborative and imaginative activity that enables you to "be" in a variety of ways, by calling on you to see the world from different perspectives and "act" accordingly. This experience, combined with the related opportunities I gained from youth work to exercise responsibility and leadership, develop skills of facilitation and presentation and work as a partner with adults in the local community, was enormously important in shaping me personally and professionally.

The longer I was involved in youth work (as a volunteer, then part-time paid and then full-time paid) the more I could see the relevance of insights and skills acquired in the field of drama to working with people, young or old. Most obviously, when one's job is to work educationally and developmentally with individuals and groups in settings where challenges of one kind or another are common (meaning, for instance, that the capacity to *appear* confident even when nervous or apprehensive is a considerable asset), and in which a variety of roles have to be adopted from time to time as appropriate (leading, listening, informing, advising, demonstrating, remonstrating, encouraging and even – as suggested above – entertaining) the correspondence with the skills involved in theatrical role playing is considerable. In this (rather limited) sense alone, youth workers can be seen as being among other things, "actors".

But the link goes deeper than this, and the lessons of drama are relevant not just for youth workers but for young people; and indeed not just for youth work but for all human engagement and interaction. This idea was brilliantly elaborated upon by the sociologist Erving Goffman in his first book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, published in 1959 and never out of print since. By the time I came across it in the early 1980s I had studied Drama and English at college and was very familiar with the melancholy words of Jaques in *As You Like It*: "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players". I knew moreover that this metaphor was a very old one, having been expressed at least as early as in the work of Plato (indeed Shakespeare probably





intended Jaques to sound somewhat wearisome as well as world-weary). But it was when I read Goffman that I began to appreciate the power and potential of the idea. He applies a "dramaturgical perspective" to the study of face-to-face interaction and indeed to the development of the self, which he said is "not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented". Referring specifically to the words of Jaques, Goffman wrote: "All the world is not, of course, a stage, but the crucial ways in which it isn't are not easy to specify".

He meant that there is a "performative" dimension to all social interaction; that we are always aware (however subliminally) of the fact that others are observing and interpreting our behaviour, and we usually want it to be interpreted in a particular way. The better we are as "actors" the more likely it is that the interpretation will accord with our intentions. Equally, as the "audience" observing and interpreting the actions of others, we are conscious that there is a meaning they would prefer us to take from those actions, and often out of politeness we pretend that this is the meaning we have taken, even if we have actually discerned something else (just as, for the most part, we do not boo and hiss in the theatre when we find an actor's performance unconvincing!).

Like all good ideas, Goffman's dramaturgical perspective on social life can be taken to unreasonable lengths and needs to be applied judiciously. But at its core I think is a vitally important acknowledgement of the purposefully creative and constructive nature of human communication and therefore of all social interaction. Goffman can in fact be regarded as part of a more general approach within sociology called symbolic interactionism, whose key principles include the following:

- Symbols are the basis for communication. Symbols can include words, gestures, objects, emblems and so on. A symbol is something that stands for – that means – something else.
- Human beings can not only use symbols, we can create and recreate them, manipulating their meaning (as in the case of languages that evolve and change over centuries, or fashion trends that can change from year to year – the "desirable" size of handbags or sunglasses, the most "attractive" colours or shapes of clothes).
- Context is crucially important. The same symbol – a spoken word, a non-verbal gesture, a particular combination of colours on a flag or even off it – can have very positive connotations

in one social or cultural context and very negative connotations in another.

Symbolic interactionism alone does not of course explain all aspects of social life. Its most obvious uses are in explaining interpersonal and small group interaction rather than broader social, political or economic processes, but it can shed light even on these. Certainly, anyone who is introduced to the insights of writers such as Goffman into the performative dynamics of human relationships or the central importance of symbols in social interaction has the opportunity to become a better communicator, more aware of the impact of their behaviour on others (and vice versa), more sensitive to the nuances of verbal and non-verbal exchanges, more alert to the importance of both content and context in the interpretation of meaning; and these things matter as much in assessing the public pronouncements of politicians and "world leaders" as they do in our everyday encounters with family, friends and colleagues.

While symbolism is central to social life in general, its significance can be seen particularly clearly in all aspects of theatrical performance (the spoken word, bodily demeanour and movement, apparel, the context of sound, light and space) and this is where youth drama comes back in, because youth drama does not just provide the opportunity to explore the ideas and issues mentioned above in an academic, textbook manner; it facilitates their exploration in very practical, energetic and enjoyable – even invigorating – ways, as is true of all good youth work. Furthermore its purpose is not just sociological – although it contributes both directly and indirectly to the meeting of social goals as well as personal development ones – but also aesthetic: it values drama for its intrinsic artistic qualities and merits. All of these points are certainly true of the approach taken within the National Association of Youth Drama. I know this not just from experiencing NAYD events and performances over the years but because I recently had the pleasure of observing a drama workshop facilitated by Dave Kelly as part of NAYD's ArtsTrain (a training programme in youth drama facilitation accredited by FETAC). The group consisted of twelve young people (roughly evenly divided gender-wise) and it was fascinating to observe the artistic process over a couple of hours, starting with some vigorous warm-up exercises (which involved mental as well as physical "stretching") and moving progressively through a series of creative and imaginative tasks and challenges, all related to key aspects of dramatic performance (characterisation, representation, physicality, awareness of others)





This pic: Co. Wexford Youth Theatre, *Trainspotting*, Photo: Tony McCleane-Fay.

but also all rich in potential for personal and social learning.

In one sequence participants broke into pairs, A and B. Partner A was given a photographic image of a person in some setting or other – it could be male or female, any age, anywhere in the world, any walk of life, any culture – and asked to embody this image, in a still pose, for partner B to observe (some use of props was allowed, from what was already to hand). Partner B, without having seen the original photograph, then interpreted and described the image as embodied by partner A to the rest of the group. The various partners A then stayed in their frozen positions while the Bs walked around and compared the original photograph, now on display, with the image created by A, bearing in mind the interpretation provided in each case by partner B! Not surprisingly this led to much hilarity. For instance whereas one partner A was described by his partner B as “a young man stretching after a mountain walk”, the original inspiration was a picture of Tina Turner in a typically raunchy pose (or at least, it seems a reasonable interpretation that her intention was to appear raunchy!).

After reversing roles and some discussion of the various representations and interpretations provided, each A and B pair then came together to create a joint image drawing on their individual photographs, and they were asked to strike an “attitude” that physically focused on another couple’s joint image. Each couple was then asked to move position and recreate the image struck by the couple they had been focusing on. Next, Dave handed out the opening lines of a dialogue between the two people in each couple, and they were asked to improvise a scene for several minutes (each started with the same exchange, but they all developed in very different ways). After some further discussion about process and content, the short scenes were then re-enacted in sequence, with only a slight pause between each, giving the event – as Dave said – something of the feel of ritual. And again the group engaged in discussion, focusing on issues such as the process of deciding on how and what to represent; the relationship between what was intended to be represented and what was discerned or perceived by others; and more “technical” questions of what would need to be addressed if this were part of a preparation for a public performance.

This account of part of the workshop, while rather schematic and certainly not doing justice to the quality of the work of the participants or of Dave as facilitator, does hopefully give some

sense of the way in which drama as an artform is dense with possibilities for exploring and expressing themes and issues that go right to the heart of “human being”, and all the more so in a youth work context, where the emphasis is not just on experience but on reflecting on and learning from that experience.

Perception, symbolism, emotion, attitude (in both the physical and mental senses) and intellect all come into play in drama-based work, and the symbiotic relationship between individual and society can be strikingly enacted. As Dave Kelly commented to the group at the end of the workshop: “You had to make sense of things [in the exercises you were asked to do], but we [the observers, the audience] had to *allow* you to make sense of things”.

This is true of so many human situations and relationships, not just interpersonal but intergenerational (and it applies equally in both directions). It is also entirely in keeping with Goffman’s “dramaturgical perspective” on life, in which actors make sense of their social reality together, creating and recreating its meaning, in a constructive and collaborative process. The exercise during the workshop in which each pair was given the same opening lines of dialogue but the resulting scenarios were all very different, also touches on an important aspect of social life and indeed a central question in social theory: the extent to which individuals are free to make choices for themselves (to exercise “agency”) even when external (“structural”) constraints exist. In this as in so many other respects, youth drama provides creative mechanisms for acquiring knowledge, skills and personal aptitudes that are enormously relevant to living and learning in today’s complex world. This is borne out by the young people themselves. At the end of the NAYD workshop, I asked the young participants to pick a word to express what they gain from their involvement in youth drama that they might not gain otherwise. I will leave the final word(s) to them: support, creativity, play, reflection, challenge, communication, confidence, togetherness, physicality, artistry, imagination.

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